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# The Scriptural Principles of Fellowship

Timothy D. Knapp

The question of how Christians can demonstrate their unity under Christ is becoming increasingly important. There is a rising tide of ecumenical activity in our circles which threatens to swamp those who carefully try to ply these troubled waters. The pressure to be a part of these endeavors often sweeps aside a reasoned understanding of how God would have us react to those activities which compromise our confession as it embodies word and deed.

True fellowship must be based on the words and teachings and life of Jesus Christ. Our Lord Himself insists on that. The implication is present when He commands His disciples to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*” (Matt. 28:19-20). Christ here is not speaking a word of law, but a word of Gospel. His concern is for salvation, not damnation. “Everything I have commanded you” is the criterion of fellowship with others. It is unthinkable for a follower of Christ to purposely sacrifice “everything I have commanded you” or even anything He has commanded us on the altar of church fellowship. Jesus is the “light of the world” (John 8:12); whoever follows Him will never walk in darkness. By following Jesus, by “obeying all I have commanded you” churches will inevitably be able to join in true fellowship. Christ Himself said to the Jews who believed Him, “If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31).

Although the Scriptures never present a systematic body of doctrine, there is always the assumption that true and false doctrine do exist and that believers should stand guard against false doctrine. Christ opposes the false doctrine of Satan in Matthew 4:4 with the Word of God. Later, Jesus warns His followers concerning false prophets who are like ravening wolves amongst the flock (Matt. 7:15-20). Jesus’ intent is to keep the flock separate from false teachers, not to unite with them. Jesus warns His disciples specifically about the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matt. 16:6, 12) which was antithetical to the teachings and purposes of Christ. When Peter introduces his version of false doctrine (Matt. 16: 21-22), Jesus totally rejects Peter’s suggestion and corrects the situation: “Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men” (Matt. 16:23).

There is yet another principle for fellowship put forth in the gospels. Jesus demands not only that His followers know and hold to His teachings, but that they acknowledge and confess them before men. Christ expects those who believe in Him and His teachings to bear witness to the same. Matthew records these words of Christ, "Whoever acknowledges Me before men, I will also acknowledge him before My Father in heaven. . ." (Matt. 10:32). Jesus makes similar statements in Mark 8:38 and Luke 12:8-10. If we are to be in fellowship with others, that fellowship, according to Jesus' will, must be based on agreement on all He has commanded. Christ has commanded not only acceptance of Him and His teachings but also a confession of those teachings before men. This confession is not simply a verbal proclamation but, as becomes evident in the epistles, involves a confession through lifestyle also.

The apostles, Christ's appointed spokesmen, went on to say much more regarding fellowship with others. The Galatian judaizers, the Corinthian libertines, the Ephesian threat (Acts 20: 29-30), and many other challenges to the teachings of Christ in the pastoral and general epistles prompted "fellowship" directives from the apostles. They never hesitated to identify false teachers for the sake of the flock. They never skirted the responsibility of denying apostolic fellowship to those groups whose teachings were perverting the faith. Equally, they often wrote warmly of those teachers and prophets who were emissaries of the Gospel, calling upon the congregations to welcome them. In this way they continued to live up to "all I have commanded you."

The early Christians recognized the authority of the apostles as Christ's messengers (Acts 2:42). The apostles themselves claimed to be teaching "all I have commanded you." The Apostle John writes, "we proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). Fellowship is based on what the apostles have seen and heard. Paul boldly proclaimed "all I have commanded you," as is stated in Acts 20:27, "For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole counsel of God." Paul calls upon the church at Rome, by virtue of the grace of God given to him, to remember certain points (Rom. 15:15-16). As one rereads the book of Romans, Paul's "certain points" are

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not simply a short shopping list, a Gospel stripped to the lowest common denominator, but a sweeping view that begins with God's wrath for fallen man and continues through righteousness by faith, life through Christ, future glory, and present sanctification. Paul later warns the Christians at Rome: "Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them" (Rom. 16:17). Paul urges the Christians to separate from those who cause dissensions or divisions concerning any of the teaching they have learned. Since Paul teaches the "whole counsel of God," this command makes sense. Any teaching that departs from the whole counsel of God is an invention of man and will serve only to confuse or contradict the "one true teaching." R.C.H. Lenski writes: "Paul's injunction is not to keep away only from total rejectors of the Gospel. What Christians ever needed such a warning? His injunction to keep away from believers who are errorists and teach falsely." Paul's injunction to avoid such men is meant to be rigorous, because "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Gal. 5:9), as Paul had already seen in Galatia and Corinth. The basis for church fellowship must be the whole counsel of God.

Paul's advice to Lutheran pastors would be the same as it was to Titus and Timothy. Paul tells Titus to hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught. The result will be that Titus can encourage his flock with sound teaching and refute those who oppose the trustworthy message, in season and out of season, in opposition to the teacher who rejects sound doctrine (1 Tim. 4:1-4). Titus is called upon to defend the faith against false teachers. He is to warn divisive people twice, then separate from them if they remain in their error (Titus 3:9-11).

What kind of errors constituted an offense worthy of separation in the early church? The following list of some of the offenses condemned will give us an idea:

1. Insisting on circumcision (Gal. 2:1-5).
2. Engaging in sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5:1-7).
3. Engaging in other forms of immorality (1 Cor. 5:11-13).
4. Denying the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor. 15).
5. Proposing that the resurrection of the dead has already occurred (2 Tim. 2:18).
6. Denying the Redeemer (2 Pet. 2:1, Jude 4).
7. Denying Christ's second coming (2 Pet. 3:3-4).

8. Denying God's Word (2 Pet. 3:3-6).
9. Disregarding the words and writings of the apostles (2 Thess. 3:14-15).
10. Denying Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:22-23).
11. Changing the grace of God into a license for immorality; denying the third use of the law (Jude 4).

From this list it is evident that errors beyond denial of the Gospel in the narrowest sense may be reason to avoid fellowship with an individual or denomination. It is also evident that errors in practice as well as in teaching constitute an offense to the Christian community. As Lutherans try to understand the scriptural principles for joining in altar and pulpit fellowship with others, the following points are clear:

1. Jesus demands obedience to His word (i.e., the entire Scripture).
2. Outward unity among Christians must consist of both teaching and practice.
3. False teachings and false teachers do exist and are to be avoided by Christians.
4. False teachers may not necessarily be rank pagans.

Scripture employs several key words which comprehend the totality of the faith. These words in their contexts provide us insight as we try to determine what is necessary to altar and pulpit fellowship with others. We will limit ourselves to those contexts that have a direct relationship to the scriptural criteria of fellowship. Much current discussion has centered around the word "gospel" or *euaggelion*. The Gospel in the narrowest sense is the promise of forgiveness of sins and justification through Christ. Yet the Gospel in this sense is not the sole basis of altar and pulpit fellowship with others. The Word of God also employs the term *euaggelion* in a wider sense. Jesus sees Himself and His words as the content of the Gospel. Although the term *euaggelion* is used sparingly in the gospels, it appears that John used the term *logos* in its place. In John 8: 31-32 Jesus promises the believing Jews that, if they hold to His words, they will know the truth and the truth will set them free. Later, in His high priestly prayer, Jesus calls upon His Father to sanctify the disciples in the word of truth that Jesus has entrusted to them.

Paul talks frequently of the *euaggelion* entrusted to him. In Paul we see the vast scope of doctrine subsumed in the Gospel. Although Paul does not include an ordered outline of his Gospel, he does apply that word specifically to the following teachings:

1. The Trinity.
2. The two natures of Christ.
3. The resurrection of the dead.
4. Justification by faith for Jesus' sake.
5. Election to salvation.
6. The Davidic ancestry of Jesus.
7. The fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament.

These points all appear in Romans 1: 1-6. Elsewhere Paul's gospel includes a recounting of the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection (1 Cor. 15) and the return of Christ for the final judgment (Romans 2:16). In the broad sense it appears that Paul's Gospel also includes the proper use of the law (1 Tim. 1:11). In all cases the Gospel is in harmony with the word of God. It is through setting forth the word of God plainly, without distortion, that the gospel in all its richness and fullness is revealed (2 Cor. 4:1-6). Again, a minimalistic view of the term "gospel" as the basis for altar and pulpit fellowship is not supported by the Scriptures or *euaggelion*.

The Greek word *didache* also has import in regard to fellowship. Only rarely does *didache* appear to relate to one teaching (instances appear in Hebrews 6:2 and 13:9). Instead, the usual sense of *didache* is the whole of Christian doctrine. The word is used in this sense of Jesus' teaching (Matt. 7:28, 22:33; Mark 4:2; 11:18; 12:38; esp. John 7:16-17; 18:19) and the teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:42; 5:28; 17:19; Romans 6:17, 16:17). With this usage in mind Karl H. Rengstorff writes:

When the Synoptists speak of the *didache* of Jesus. . .they do not mean a particular dogmatics or ethics, but His whole *didaskhein*, His proclamation of the will of God as regards both form and content. In John, too, *didache* comprehends the whole *didaskhein* of Jesus and does not merely denote a compendium of His individual statements. Similarly, Matt. 16:12: *he didache ton Pharisaion kai Saddoukaion* has in view the whole of what the Pharisees or Sadducees *didaskousin* or Acts 2:42 the whole of what the Apostles *edidaskon*. Paul follows the same usage when he employs *didache* both for the totality of his *didaskhein* and for the *didaskhein* that might be necessary in individual cases (1 Cor. 14:6, 26).<sup>2</sup>

Connected with this view of *didache* is the concept of *didaskalia* and Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16. Paul writes that all Scripture is

useful for instruction. One would surmise that all of Scripture contains the *didache*, the teachings to which Christians are to cling. It is through the Scriptures that men are thoroughly equipped.

The word *heterodidaskaleo* gives us a further glimpse of the sense and importance of *didache* of Scripture. Rengstorf writes:

The word presupposes a *heterodidaskalos* which is not mentioned in the N.T. though the persons concerned are often present. The nearest approach to the term is Paul's description of the "gospel" of the Galatian Judaizers as *heteron euaggelion ho ouk estin allo*: the name is wrongly claimed for their preaching because there is only one *euaggelion* and this is proclaimed by Paul, any other being no gospel. It is in this light that we are to understand *hetero* in *heterodidaskalein*. It carries with it the proclamation of a *hetera didaskalia* which is a perversion and is thus to be rejected.<sup>3</sup>

The occurrence of *pseudodidaskalos* in 2 Peter 2:1 also carries the strong condemnation of any teaching that differs from the *didache* of Christ and the apostles as a false teaching introduced by false teachers, both of which should be rejected.

Finally, *pistis* and *homologia* are closely related to each other and to the proper understanding of a basis for the external unity of the church. *Pistis* is used in various senses in the Scriptures. For purposes of this discussion *pistis* as "the content of faith" will be the matter to be explored. Galatians 1:23 uses *pistis* as the faith in a broad sense. Paul now proclaims the *pistis* he once tried to destroy. This *pistis* is identical to Paul's *euaggelion* (discussed previously) and his *didache*, as he writes to Timothy: "If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, brought up in the truths of the faith and the good teaching you have followed" (1 Tim. 4:6). To fall victim to error is to abandon the faith (1 Tim. 4:1), to reject the faith (1 Tim. 1:19), or to wander from the faith (1 Tim. 6:21). *Homologia* and *pistis* become closely related to each other in commands to express the church's faith in confession. Our active confession of the faith is implied in Jesus' words concerning the witness of Christians in Luke 12:8-10, Matthew 10:32-33, and Mark 8:38. This is a confession of the faith, of the teaching, of "all I have commanded you," of the Gospel. Faith and confession are intimately tied together in Romans 10:9-10 and 2 Corinthians 4:13-15. That which is held to be true is to be confessed

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before men. Again, in Hebrews 4:14, the church is told to hold firmly to the faith it professes. This confession may not be silenced but must contain the faith, the body of doctrine, for on it the true unity of the church rests. We are “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ Himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit” (Eph. 2:20-21).

It is certain that Christ and the apostles placed the highest priority on the conservation and promulgation of the faith. Those congregations and individuals who held to the one true faith banded together in a visible, unified manner, always under the authority of the apostolic teachings. Those who misunderstood the faith or aspects thereof (Acts 18:24-26) were corrected and, upon exchanging error for truth, restored to the community (Acts 18:27). Those who persisted in false teachings (e.g., 2 Tim. 2:16-18) were noted and avoided (Rom. 16:17-18). Lutherans today have the same privilege and obligation to conserve and promulgate the apostolic faith as did our predecessors. Where we joyfully and in unity of faith can join in common worship with others, we do it with vigor and enthusiasm. Where the faith calls us to reject common worship and substitute correction or rebuke, we do it with love, sobriety, and solemnity. In any event, as we are faced with the temptation to ignore or compromise the faith, we must remain first and foremost people who hold to “everything I have commanded you.”

#### Endnotes

1. R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 918.
2. Karl H. Rengstorf, “*Didache*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 164.
3. Karl H. Rengstorf, “*Heterodidaskaleo*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, II, p. 163.

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