

Lesson 10

The Doctrine of Church Fellowship

Church Fellowship probably doesn't register on your radar as a Bible doctrine that you are that familiar with. And if it is something you are familiar with, you are most likely in the minority of American Christians.

Christians often have their first encounter with the doctrine of Church Fellowship in a practical application of its principles. And most often they feel a bit blindsided. "Why can't I take communion in your church? I'm a Christian!" is probably one of the most common first encounters with church fellowship. A few others are: "Why doesn't the WELS support the Boy/Girl Scouts?" "Why doesn't the WELS participate in inter-faith worship services or community prayer services?" "Why can't my Catholic relative sing a solo at my wedding or at dad's funeral?" These 'negative' experiences leave many thinking that the WELS is a bunch of rude, stuck-up, conceited, holier-than-thou Christians who like to look down their noses at other Christians, but can't see the problems within their own church.

The purpose of this lesson is to better inform the Christian on the loving wisdom and purpose of the Doctrine of Church Fellowship. It is not a WELS invention. Its basis is found in God's Word, the Bible, and it plays a vital role in a congregation.

In this lesson, we will answer the following questions:

1. What is fellowship?
2. Why does God want us to practice the Doctrine of Church Fellowship?
3. What is God's will in practicing the Doctrine of Church Fellowship?
4. What happens when we welcome false teachers or false teachings into our midst?
5. What are different ways that we can show fellowship?

WHAT IS FELLOWSHIP?

Please read the following passages and then answer the corresponding questions.

III John 3,4,8 It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth.⁴ I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.⁸ We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth.

Psalm 133:1 How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in *unity!*

- 1) According to the italicized portions of these passages, how does God define fellowship?
- 2) According to the underlined portions of these passages, what does fellowship look like?

✓ Fellowship: Friendly relationships between people and activities in which they work together to advance their common goals.

Christian Fellowship: The spiritual relationship that we have with God through faith in Christ. Christian fellowship may also refer to the spiritual ties that we have with all believers as members of the invisible church. These ties are expressed in three ways:

1. The spiritual fellowship that all believers have with God and with each other through faith in Christ (faith).
2. The doctrinal fellowship that is recognized by a shared confession of the truth (confession).
3. The fellowship that is expressed by joint activities (action).

Church fellowship is Christians working together for the truth.

✓ Synod: From the Greek prefix ‘syn’, which means ‘with’, and the Greek word ‘odos’, which means ‘road’—‘Walking together on the road.’

Please read the following passages and then answer the corresponding questions.

I Timothy 1:3-4 As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command *certain men* not to *teach false doctrines* any longer⁴ nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God’s work—which is by faith.

II Corinthians 6:14-16a Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?¹⁵ What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?¹⁶ What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

Romans 16:17-18 I urge you, brothers, to watch out for *those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned.* Keep away from them.¹⁸ For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.

3) According to the italicized portions of these passages, what does God warn us about?

4) According to the underlined portions of these passages, what does God tell us to do?

Church fellowship is Christians avoiding any expression of worship with anyone who has a false teaching/practice.

WHY DOES GOD WANT US TO PRACTICE THE DOCTRINE OF CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

Please read the following passages and then answer the corresponding questions.

I Timothy 1:3-5 As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer⁴ nor to devote themselves to myths and

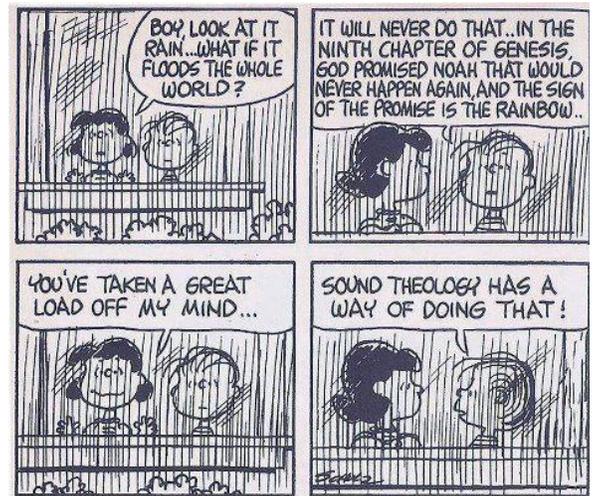
endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith.⁵ The goal of this command is *love*, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

I Timothy 4:16 Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

- 5) Earlier when we looked at I Timothy, we heard Paul instruct the young pastor Timothy to command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer. According to the italicized portion of these passages, what is the goal of this command?

- 6) According to the underlined portions of these passages, what does God tell us to do?

- 7) According to the double-underlined portion of these passages, why does God tell us to watch our life and doctrine closely and persevere in them?



WHAT IS GOD'S WILL IN PRACTICING THE DOCTRINE OF CHURCH FELLOWSHIP?

Please read the following passages and then answer the corresponding questions.

John 17:20,21a,23b My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²¹ that *all of them may be one*, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. *May they be brought to complete unity* to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

I Corinthians 1:10 I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be *perfectly united in mind and thought*.

I John 1:3 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.

- 8) According to the italicized portions of these passages, what is God's will in practicing the Doctrine of Church Fellowship?

Please read the following passages and then answer the corresponding questions.

Ephesians 4:3 *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit* through the bond of peace.

John 8:31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you *hold to my teaching*, you are really my disciples.

Matthew 28:19-20 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them *to obey everything I have commanded you*. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Revelation 22:18-19 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: *If anyone adds anything to them*, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. ¹⁹ *And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy*, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

Psalm 119:104 I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path.

John 4:24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.

9) According to the italicized portions of these passages, what is God’s will in practicing the Doctrine of Church Fellowship?

10) According to the underlined portions of these passages, what is God’s will in practicing the Doctrine of Church Fellowship?

Please read the following passages and then answer the corresponding questions.

Matthew 7:15-16 *Watch out for false prophets*. They come to you *in sheep’s clothing*, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them.

II Corinthians 11:13-15 For such men are *false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ*. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for *Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light*. ¹⁵ It is not surprising, then, if *his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness*. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

Romans 16:17 I urge you, brothers, to *watch out for* those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. *Keep away from them*.

I John 4:1 Dear friends, *do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits* to see whether they are from God, *because many false prophets have gone out into the world*.

Acts 17:11 Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and *examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true*.

11) According to the italicized portions of these passages, what is God’s will in practicing the Doctrine of Church Fellowship?

THE NEED FOR CONFESSIONS

Since we cannot know whether the people in a church have faith in their hearts or not, our testing of a church will have to be made on the basis of what a church confesses (Rom. 10:10; Mt. 12:37).

Most churches have a written statement of what they believe and teach. These statements are called confessions. But since churches don't always practice what they preach or confess, we will also have to test a church's practice as well as its confessional statement.

Sometimes people will say that they don't agree with the errors in the confession or practice of the church to which they belong. But if they continue to attend and support a false church, then they are holding to the confession of that church (II Jn. 10,11).

Our Lutheran Church has a number of confessions. They are:

1. The Small Catechism (Luther, 1529)
2. The Large Catechism (Luther, 1529)
3. The Augsburg Confession (Melanchthon, 1530)
4. The Apology (Melanchthon, 1530)
5. The Smalcald Articles (Luther, 1537)
6. The Formula of Concord (written by a committee of Lutherans, 1577)

These were all written at the time of the Reformation and were published together in the *Book of Concord* in 1580.

Since some new errors have troubled the Lutheran Church in the 1900's, our Wisconsin Synod has published a confessional tract called "This We Believe." This tract confesses what is truth and what is error according to God's Word in regard to these new matters which are troubling the church today.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE WELCOME FALSE TEACHERS OR FALSE TEACHINGS INTO OUR MIDST?

Please read the following passages and then answer the corresponding questions.

II Timothy 2:17-18 Their teaching will *spread like gangrene*. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus,¹⁸ who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.

Matthew 16:6, 11-12 "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the *yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees*."¹¹ How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the *yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees*."¹² Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the *teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees*.

II Peter 3:17-18 Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position.¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

II John 9-11 Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.¹⁰ If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him.¹¹ Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.

12) According to the italicized portions of these passages, how does God describe false doctrine?

13) According to the underlined portions of these passages, what does God say false doctrine can do?

- 14) According to the double-underlined portion of these passages, what charge does God level against those who supported these false teachers?
- 15) On the basis of what we have learned in this section, what are the implications for our faith, our worship, and our support of religious ministries?

WHAT ARE DIFFERENT WAYS THAT WE CAN SHOW FELLOWSHIP?

Perhaps you have already figured out some of the big obvious ways that we show fellowship, such as membership at a church and support of a church's or religious organization's ministry, whether that be financial support or volunteer work. But the applications of what we have looked at so far extend beyond the reach of these two. It encompasses every act or expression of worship and working together that we might do.

Please read the following passages and then answer the corresponding questions.

I Corinthians 10:17 Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, *for we all partake of the one loaf.*

Acts 2:42,46 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to *the breaking of bread* and to prayer.⁴⁶ Every day they continued to **meet together in the temple courts**. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.

- 16) According to the italicized portions of these passages, how can Christians show fellowship/unity?
- 17) According to the underlined portion of these passages, how can Christians show fellowship/unity?
- 18) According to the double-underlined portion of these passages, how can Christians show fellowship/unity?

Please read the following passages and then answer the corresponding questions.

Acts 13:1-3 In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*"³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

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Acts 15:1-35 In summary, the Christian church worked together to *resolve an issue*.

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