

Lake Geneva

CONFERENCE REPORT



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IMPORTANT

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Preface

On March 1, 1999 the Lord brought together 28 brethren who responded to a general invitation to study the Word of God. Of concern to us was the subject of Fellowship and other related issues which have caused division and heartache among God's people. For the next five days we prayed, studied and counselled together to gain insight and direction from the Lord. We constantly prayed for the Head of the Church to lead us in His will.

Lake Geneva

Each day was filled with 7 hours of prayer and study. The topic was broken down into six segments, each building on the one before:

- MondayPrinciples of Biblical Interpretation
- TuesdayThe Church
- WednesdayWhat is the basis for fellowship?
What are the limits to fellowship?
- Thursday.....What is defilement?
The Body
- FridayPrayer, preparation for Phase 2 in Kenosha.

Each day concluded with a review of a statement of consensus which served to summarize the material we had covered that day along with the insights gained from the Word. This process proved to be very valuable throughout the week.

As expected, the challenge of learning from the Holy Spirit was exciting and difficult. We determined to set aside our own opinions and convictions, and to allow the Lord to identify those principles and practices which were in accord with His purposes for His Church. There were times when the slowness of the process generated frustration, but by the end of the week we could look back and see clear evidence of the path on which the Lord had led us.

Kenosha

On Friday afternoon, about 60 brothers gathered for the second phase of the conference which continued through late Saturday afternoon. Brief reports were given on each of the six topics, followed by open discussion, questions and clarifications.

Clear evidences of God at work

We were particularly grateful to the Lord for the wonderful spirit which prevailed throughout the entire conference.

- ◆ During the first phase of the conference, virtually everyone in attendance contributed to the study.
- ◆ There was liberty to disagree and willingness to be corrected.
- ◆ There were remarkably few topics on which we were not able to find general consensus. Yet even these differences were helpful because, for the first time, we now know precisely what areas to focus on in future prayer and discussion. We chose not to view these differences as irreconcilable, but to see them merely as evidences of our need for continued dependence upon God.
- ◆ We spoke in plain English, often going to great lengths to define terms and intent.
- ◆ We did not debate over the writings of men, but confined our study to the only authority – God’s Word.
- ◆ With few exceptions, questions were asked and explored until they were answered.
- ◆ Care was taken to examine the context of various passages.

A work in progress

Most importantly, we left with the strong sense that this was truly a work in progress. The material presented in this report is not to be taken as an edict, but rather as a reporting of the perspectives we gleaned from the Scriptures. We believe that we would be remiss in our duties if we did not communicate what we had learned. We are very conscious of the fact that a number of key points contained in this report are at odds with the convictions and practices long held by many. On some of the subjects, conversation and study has continued even after the conference, but these further developments are not elaborated on in the report. The Word of God is truly rich, and defies any attempt by man to render quick judgments. We do not consider ourselves to be authorities, but rather as students who welcome fur-

ther illumination from the Holy Spirit, and the counsel of our brethren who come with the same attitude.

Don't take our word for it

We strongly encourage all who read this report to not take it as an authoritative, final word on the subject; we believe there is much more to be learned and clarified. Instead, we invite you to follow the example of the Bereans, to measure every thought and concept by the Word. To do so, it will be necessary to set aside the writings of men – however dear – and allow the Spirit of God to illumine the Word on His terms. We also invite your questions and comments, and would be happy to clarify the intent of any portion of this report that may seem unclear.

Read the entire report

One final encouragement: As you read the following pages, bear in mind that the report is necessarily progressive in nature. Readers are strongly advised to reserve judgment until they have read the entire report. Some concepts and details which are barely mentioned in earlier sections, may be treated more fully in later sections.

Our prayer

We are very conscious of the bitter and partisan climate which has prevailed in recent years. It is our sincere prayer that God will bring clarity and peace to the uncertainty and fear that trouble the hearts of so many. May His Name be praised.

Pieter Boom, Sr.

Jim Campbell

Humphrey Duncanson

Paul Hadley

David Hart

John Lyman

Ian Taylor

William Van Ryn

Hermeneutics: The discipline of understanding

The summary

1. Man is the weak link in the divine communication process.
2. The Holy Spirit works to supernaturally instruct man in the mind of God as revealed in the Scriptures.
3. The principles of Biblical interpretation discipline man to consciously and objectively submit to the instruction of the Holy Spirit.
4. We identified 5 principles which define the relationship between the Old and New Testaments:

Principle 1: All Scripture is inspired by God and is equally authoritative.

Principle 2: The two testaments serve different yet complementary roles in conveying the revelation of God.

Principle 3: The New Testament reveals the mystery of the Church, and establishes the teachings which govern its form and practice.

Principle 4: If a practice is not clearly and specifically taught in the New Testament, then the teachings and examples of the Old Testament may not be used to introduce or prescribe practices and procedures for the Church.

Principle 5: Throughout the Old Testament, God conveys His revelation in various forms:

First, progressive revelation. For example, the revelation of God concerning Himself is progressive across the entire span of the Scriptures, therefore the teachings regarding the nature, character and attributes of God are timeless and transcend the Testaments.

Second, messianic prophecies find their primary fulfillment in the Lord Jesus.

Third, the specific procedures outlined in the Law were specific to those living under the law, and cannot be applied in their literal form to the Church. These are applicable only when the details are distilled into very general principles.

5. The types of the Old Testament add much beauty to the rich fabric of God's revelation, but they are subject to strict interpretive guidelines which protect the student from flights of fancy and unsubstantiated interpretations of Scripture.

The study

The first day was devoted to the study of Biblical interpretation, or hermeneutics. The sheer volume of material, coupled with the technical nature of the subject, necessitated a lecture format with the presentations being given by our brother, Fred Dickason. Fred has served the Lord for more than thirty years as a Bible teacher at the Moody Bible Institute. His very evident love for the Word of God brought life to his many years of scholarship and experience in this subject area. His five lectures left ample opportunity for discussion, comments and questions. His goal for the day was to provide a synopsis and illustration of the basic principles of Biblical interpretation, which could then be used as tools for use in our later discussions.

By the end of the day we were renewed in our awareness of the awesome privilege of having such access to the Word of God, along with a keen sense of our responsibility to handle it with reverence and care. Though many useful topics were addressed, there were several perspectives and principles which were particularly applicable to the current circumstances and concerns that gave rise to this conference.

The discipline of understanding

Early in the day we saw that effective communication is dependent both upon the ability of the speaker to accurately convey his intent, and the ability of the listener to accurately understand the intent of the speaker. We considered that the weak link in divine communication is not the speaker (God), but the listener (man), since God has spoken perfectly and authoritatively to man through the Scriptures. To overcome the total inability of finite man to comprehend the thoughts of an infinite God (Isaiah 55:8,9; Romans 11:33,34), the Holy Spirit works to supernaturally instruct us in the mind of God (1 Corinthians 2:9-16).

Furthermore, we noted that, though the Spirit is the final authority on the mind of God, this does not negate the responsibility of man to ensure that his thoughts are truly subject to the illumination of the Spirit (2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Peter 1:20,21). Far from being a substitute for the Spirit's instruction, the study of hermeneutics identifies the basic disciplines which promote the objective, thorough study of the Scriptures. Such an approach allows the *Spirit of God* to identify the correct interpretation and application of the passage, and maintains man's proper role as *student* and *servant*.

Two testaments, one revelation

The responsible use of the Old and New Testaments is a central issue for all students of the Word. If the Old Testament Scriptures were given to introduce and prescribe practices and procedures for the Church, then we can adopt the regulations and procedures established under the Law to govern our behavior today. On the other hand, if the Old Testament Scriptures were given to identify timeless principles and transcendent truths (e.g. the character and nature of God, the nature of man, etc), as well to provide illustrations of principles and procedures that would be established only in the New Testament (cp 1 Corinthians 10:6,11), then this defines the boundaries for applying the Old Testament Scriptures to this present dispensation.

The Lord helped us to identify several key principles which proved helpful in defining the relationship between the New and Old Testaments, and in establishing the nature and scope of their applicability to believers in this age.

Principle 1: Inspired by God

All Scripture – encompassing both Testaments – is inspired by God and is completely inerrant and authoritative (Exodus 20:1; 2 Samuel 23:2,3; Ezra 9:4; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21).

Principle 2: A seamless revelation

Though they form a single canon, the two Testaments serve different yet complementary roles in conveying the revelation of God (1 Corinthians 10:6,11; Galatians 3:23-25; Colossians 2:16,17; Hebrews 10:1; 1 Peter 1:10-12). Though two Testaments, they form a seamless revelation concerning Christ (Luke 24:27,44; John 5:39,40; Acts 8:30-35; Hebrews 1:1,2).

Principle 3: The mystery revealed

The New Testament reveals the mystery of the Church: long hidden from man, but always known to God (Ephesians 3:1-12; Colossians 1:24-27; 1 Peter 1:10-12). The teachings given through the inspired writers of the New Testament define the nature of the Church, and establish the teachings which govern the form and practice of the Church. These teachings – generally given as principles rather than as specific precepts, rules and regulations – represent God's revelation concerning the Church.

Principle 4: Enriched by example

If a practice is not clearly and specifically taught in the New Testament, then the teachings and examples of the Old Testament may not be used to introduce or prescribe practices and procedures for the Church. The ceremonial regulations and legal procedures described in the Old Testament serve rather to enrich our understanding of principles and teachings later established in the New.

Principle 5: Careful application

The Old Testament contains many wonderful and authoritative truths, principles and examples which are written for our benefit and learning. When making application of these Scriptures, care must be taken to distinguish the type of writing being considered, and how that determines the manner in which it may be applied (2 Timothy 2:15). Specifically, we defined the application of four types of Old Testament Scripture:

First, progressive revelation. As an example, the revelation of God concerning Himself is progressive across the entire span of the Scriptures, therefore the teachings regarding the nature, character and attributes of God are timeless and transcend the Testaments (Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7; 1 Peter 1:16; Malachi 3:6). Though all the patriarchs knew God, Adam did not know as much of the nature and ways of God as did Abraham, who himself did not know as much as Moses, simply because God continued to reveal Himself over time. Certainly Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel benefited from the continued revelation of God, and thus had a broader knowledge of the God they served than the patriarchs.

Second, the prophetic passages referring to the Lord Jesus, which have been or will be fulfilled in Him (Matthew 27:3-10; cp w/ Zechariah 11:11-13; Matthew 2:5,6; cp w/Micah 5:2; Acts 3:18; 17:2,3). The application of these passages is quite specific to the Lord Jesus, though they often bear a double meaning. For example: Though some of the Messianic Psalms anticipate the sufferings of Christ, they also describe the sufferings of the psalmist himself (Psalms 22,69); and thus the reader can also derive helpful practical insights on the subject of suffering. But the passage finds its ultimate fulfillment in the Lord Jesus.

Third, the procedures outlined in the Law were specific to those living under the law, and cannot be applied in their literal form to the Church (Acts 15:1-27; Galatians 3:10-12; 5:2). For example, the law of the leper (Leviticus 13) is to be understood in the context of public health and safety. From it we learn the wisdom and compassion of God in protecting His people from the ravages of communicable diseases. These passages describing the specific

regulations and procedures of the Law are applicable only when the details are distilled into very general principles (Acts 15:16,17; 2 Corinthians 6:17,18; 9:9; Galatians 4:27).

Of allegories and types

Finally, we examined principles governing the identification and use of types. Types have a special beauty which add much to our understanding of Scripture. Of particular concern to us was the danger of abusing types by stretching them beyond their intended use. There is no question that types exist, but their understanding, use and application are governed by strict guidelines which protect the student from flights of fancy and unsubstantiated interpretations of Scripture. The following summary is adapted from the lecture notes provided by Fred Dickason:

Allegorical Interpretation: The allegorical method of interpretation regards the normal meaning of words as a mere vehicle to convey the deeper and true meaning of the text. This method arose with the pagan Greeks, was adopted by Hellenistic Jews and some early Christian Church Fathers. It became adopted by the Roman Catholic Church and became the method that dominated the Church's exegesis of the Bible until the Reformation.

Because allegorical interpretation flows *from* the mind of the reader *into* the text (eisegesis), the reader is able to identify any concept he wishes to establish simply by looking to the supposed deeper, hidden meaning behind words of the text. In contrast, sound Biblical interpretation flows *from* the text *to* the mind of the reader (exegesis), and is less subject to the fancy of the reader.

What is a type: "A type is a divinely purposed anticipation which illustrates its anti-type. These two parts of one theme are related to each other by the fact that the same truth or principle is embodied in each." (Lewis S. Chafer).

How to identify a type: There is usually one or, at most, a few main features of a type. The main features are found in a genuine parallel between the type and its antitype. Some details which fill in the picture of a type in its historical setting are intended merely as support elements and do not correspond to the details of the anti-type. Details should not be taken to the extreme, and are not intended to be interpreted or applied.

For example, the crossing of the Red Sea serves as a type of baptism (1 Corinthians 10:1,2). Though the finer details may suggest helpful illustrations which enrich our understanding of baptism, it is inappropriate to enforce the interpretation of the specific historic details of the event (e.g. the chariots getting bogged down in the mud) since these do not correspond to any specific antitype in the New Testament.

Because types foreshadow specific teachings given in the New Testament, they must prefigure something future from its historical setting. Therefore, a type is always found in the Old Testament, and the antitype in the New Testament. Types are not found in the New Testament.

Nothing forbidden or sinful may be regarded as a type of what is good. For example, though both are kings, David may foreshadow Christ, but Ahab does not.

How to interpret types:

1. The perfections of a type are found in the antitype, but not its imperfections. For example, though Isaac serves as a legitimate type of Christ, the sins and failings of Isaac can never find any fulfillment in Christ. For this reason there are clear and necessary limitations in interpreting and applying types. See also Hebrews 7:26,27.
2. The historical and cultural setting of the type should be considered. Thus, the passover lamb, the rock, and the manna, are all types which arose out of specific historical contexts which define the interpretation and application of the type.
3. A type must never be used to *teach* the doctrine of the antitype, but to *illustrate* doctrines taught in the New Testament.
4. Note how the New Testament treats the Old Testament types and guide your interpretation by its example and spirit.

The Church: The community of the redeemed

The Summary

1. The Church is comprised of every blood-bought, Spirit-indwelt believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, from Pentecost to the rapture.
2. Local expressions of the Body are reflections of the universal Church.
3. The purpose of the Church is displayed both in its vertical relationship (between God and man) and its horizontal relationship (between man and man).
4. The Church has no intrinsic authority, but is only the vehicle through which Christ expresses His authority. There are three fundamental principles of authority:

Principle 1: God is the Sovereign.

Principle 2: Man is the servant.

Principle 3: God always initiates, man is to obey.

5. We drew three conclusions from the principles:

Observation 1: God is never in a position of ratifying the decisions of man.

Observation 2: The two passages which teach the principle of binding and loosing refer to individuals, and do not provide a precedent for inter-assembly relations. The Lord Jesus never grants to man the authority of judging an assembly, but reserves that right to Himself alone. We were unable to find any basis or precedent in Scripture for one assembly excommunicating another assembly.

Observation 3: The limitations arising from human fallibility coupled with the interdependent nature of the Church obligate a local assembly to seek or accept counsel from other believers as an expression of dependence upon the Lord.

The Study

Tuesday was devoted to an overview of the Church. The broad nature of the subject precluded any attempt at comprehensive coverage, instead we focused our attention upon those principles most germane to the discussions to follow on Wednesday and Thursday.

The Church: universal and local

First we considered the nature and composition of the Church. The Church – whether in its universal or local expression – is comprised of every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. Each believer in this dispensation has been redeemed by the blood of Christ, baptized into His Body by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13), and called out into fellowship with the Son (1 Corinthians 1:9) and the Father (1 John 1:3). All believers are called from lives of sin, but have together been washed, sanctified and justified (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Local expressions of the Body are reflections of the universal Church. The fact that the universal Church encompasses every believer leads to the obvious necessity to meet in smaller groups (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2). Though believers in any given locale cannot all meet in the same facility, their identity as true believers and members of the Body is in no way diminished because they meet separately, or because they are part of distinct denominational affiliations.

In addition to the Body, the Church is represented in the Scriptures by other metaphors, including a Bride and a House. Though we did not concentrate on these metaphors as topics *per se*, the implications of these aspects permeated our discussions.

What is the purpose of the Church?

While in this world the Church has the privilege of being here for God. Vertically, the Church exists to fellowship with God, to provide a place for God to dwell among His people (Ephesians 2:22), to display through our character and walk the glories of God (1 Corinthians 10:31-33), and to worship God (1 Peter 2:5,6,9). Horizontally the Church exists to be a witness for Christ to the unbelieving, to make disciples, to baptize, and to teach to obey the Lord Jesus (Matthew 28:19,20). Further, it serves (through its individual members and local assemblies) as salt and light (Matthew 5:13–16; Philippians 2:15; Colossians 4:6) to the world, to edify

believers (1 Corinthians 14:12; Ephesians 4:11-16) through the exercise of the gifts (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:7), and to produce fruit for the Father (John 15:1-5; cp Galatians 5:22-23).

Does the Church have authority?

Many other questions were addressed, but the discussion on the authority and governance of the Church was central to our deliberations. In the normal course of events, assemblies will make decisions which have bearing upon both their internal affairs, as well as their relationships with other assemblies. The question of the nature and scope of an assembly's authority to act relates significantly to our present circumstances, because it defines the extent to which other assemblies are bound by such actions and decisions. Two basic questions were considered:

- 1. Is a decision by a local assembly ratified by heaven and, therefore, binding upon all other assemblies?*
- 2. Is there a Biblical basis for one assembly to excommunicate another assembly?*

The Church has no authority of her own, and therefore can act only in submission to the authority of her Head who dwells in her (Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:22-24; Matthew 18:19-20). Consequently, the Church is the vehicle through which the Lord gives expression to *His* authority over the affairs of *His* Body.

The implications of divine authority

We then turned our attention to Scriptures which historically have been understood to deal with specific expressions of this authority, i.e. the binding and loosing of actions and decisions affecting the Church (Matthew 16:19 and 18:18). It was observed that both passages employ a grammatical construction in the Greek which is used nowhere else in the New Testament. There is, however, some debate over the correct rendering of the Greek, and thus the following translations are offered only to give insight, and are not an attempt at an authoritative translation.

Matthew 16:19

*"I will give thee the keys of the kingdom of the heavens, and whatever thou bindest on the earth **shall be having been** bound in the heavens, and whatever thou loosest on the earth **shall be having been** loosed in the heavens." **

Matthew 18:18

*"Truly I say to you, whatever things ye bind on the earth **shall be having been** bound in heaven, and whatever things ye loose on the earth **shall be having been** loosed in heaven." **

** Taken from the second edition of the The Interlinear Greek/English New Testament (Nestle), with a literal English translation by Alfred Marshall, D.Litt. This translation is corroborated by Kenneth Wuest's expanded translation.*

Regardless of the exact translation of the text, the context of these passages coupled with supporting cross references helped us to identify several helpful principles and observations which give direction concerning the above questions:

Principle 1: God is the Sovereign

God is sovereign and is always the source and initiator of divine authority (Isaiah 46:9-11; Romans 9:16-21; 11:33-36; Ephesians 1:11).

Principle 2: Man is the servant

Man is the creature/servant and is always called upon to submit to divine authority (John 14:21-24; Romans 1:5).

Principle 3: Heaven initiates

Therefore, any action of the Church which binds or looses is always *in response* to what God has *already* initiated in heaven. In this way the sovereignty of Heaven is acknowledged. Given man's inherent fallibility, the opposite order would place God in the position of having to ratify decisions and actions which may well be wrong.

Once we established these principles, we were able to draw several conclusions:

Observation 1: The order of authority

Any attempt by man to reverse this order of authority is an affront to God, who is never in a position of ratifying decisions and actions rendered on earth.

Observation 2: Binding and loosing

Each of these passages is subject to a specific sphere of application as defined by the context:

Matthew 16:19 refers specifically to Peter's commission as the keeper of the keys to the kingdom of heaven. We identified three occasions when Peter fulfilled this commission: Acts 2 when the gospel was preached to Jews; Acts 8:14-17 when salvation came to the Samaritans; and Acts 10 when the gospel was extended to the Gentiles.

Matthew 18 :18 is set in the context of an offense by one individual against another, and provides a pattern and procedure for addressing such situations.

In each case the teaching regarding binding and loosing (16:19; 18:18) is not given as a directive for inter-assembly relations. Furthermore, we were unable to find any basis or precedent in Scripture for one assembly to discipline or excommunicate another assembly. Any such action seems exceeds the jurisdiction of an assembly, and usurps the authority of the Lord Jesus (Revelation 1–3 assigns this jurisdiction to the Lord alone). In the absence of New Testament teaching on the subject, the regulations and procedures outlined in the law should not be used to *introduce* (i.e. originate) precedents which would apply this teaching to inter-assembly relations.

Interdependence. While there is an abundance of instruction and example in Scripture governing relations between individual believers (Romans 12 and Colossians 3 are examples), there is very little specific guidance which would shed light on how assemblies should relate to one another on a corporate level. On the other hand, it is clear that, just as all individual members of the Body of Christ are “members one of another” (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12), so also all assemblies share a similar interdependent relationship (Romans 16:1-16; 1 Corinthians 16:19-20). This relationship, by definition, extends to all local expressions of the Body of Christ, and therefore may not be limited to any “circle of fellowship” smaller than the entire Body. Indeed, the concept of a limited “circle of fellowship” has no apparent basis in Scripture.

Addressing corporate error. Regrettably, there are occasions when an assembly does engage in questionable practices or teachings which impugn the character of Christ and His work. Such circumstances demand a careful response which does not usurp the authority of the Lord Jesus over His Church. For example:

Acts 15: The Jerusalem council. While Acts 15 and 2 Timothy 2:19-21 have sometimes been viewed as precedents for addressing situations where corporate error exists, the Scriptures preclude their applicability to inter-assembly actions. The precedent of Acts 15 is helpful in establishing a principle for believers from different assemblies counselling together. Though it provides a clear and helpful *description* of this event (the Acts being an historical accounting of the early Church), it is not presented as a *prescription* for practice.

This passage does reference three patterns which are helpful to us in our current circumstances:

First, Antioch initiated the discussion, and sought help from the believers in Jerusalem (15:2-3). There may be several reasons for this,

among them is the fact that – as the “oldest” church in existence at the time – the church in Jerusalem was blessed with the experience of the apostles and elders who gathered there (15:2). Also, the false teachers who came to Antioch, came from Judea – a region more familiar to the Jerusalem believers (15:1).

Second, the saints in Jerusalem did not “render a verdict” on the situation, but hosted an investigation and discussion of the issue. The final statement was “drafted” through the collaborative efforts of all those present (15:22). It is encouraging to see the spirit of cooperation and edification which prevailed in this council. There is no sense of one assembly acting against another, rather both worked together for the greater good of the testimony of Christ.

Third, it is significant that, though the issue under consideration surfaced in Antioch, it held clear implications for the Church at large (e.g. the letter was sent to the believers in Antioch and the provinces of Syria and Cilicia; 15:23). Therefore it would be unwarranted to take this pattern as being normative for addressing matters which are strictly local concerns.

2 Timothy 2: The useful servant. We further noted the teaching of 2 Timothy 2:19–21, which the context applies specifically to Christian workers serving against the backdrop of apostasy. Paul counsels Timothy – himself a Christian worker – to preserve his usefulness as a servant (a vessel) of the Lord by distancing (cleansing) himself from those servants of ignoble character (e.g. Hymenaeus and Philetus (2:17) were both apostate; cp 1 Timothy 1:20). Far from being merely an option, the nature of the servant's calling was such that every servant who confesses the name of Christ must turn away from iniquity. Thus the focus of this passage is usefulness to the Master, and not Church discipline.

Revelation 2–3: The judgment of the Lord. When it comes to addressing assemblies on a corporate level, it appears that the Scripture leaves the judgment to the Lord alone. Though believers may offer counsel, if repentance is not forthcoming, the Lord – not man – may act in judgment toward that assembly by removing its candlestick from its place (Revelation 2:5). Even the apostle Paul is careful to respect this demarcation when he passed judgment on the unrepentant believer living in sin. He did not act to discipline or excommunicate the assembly that tolerated this sin (1 Corinthians 5:3).

Observation 3: The limitations resulting from human fallibility.

Since actions and decisions made on earth are subject to the limitations arising out of human fallibility, special care needs to be taken in truly discerning the initiative of Heaven. There is always the danger of usurping God's initiative by binding matters on earth which have *not* been bound in heaven, or failing to bind on earth what *has* been bound in heaven. Humans, therefore, should approach such actions in a spirit of humility.

When a local assembly is compelled to address matters which will have impact beyond their locale (e.g. a decision to discipline or excommunicate a teacher whose ministry extends beyond his local assembly), the very nature of the interdependent relationship would suggest that the assembly make every effort to act in concert with the counsel of other assemblies, being careful not to limit counsel merely on the basis of geographic proximity (which invokes an inappropriate application of Old Testament law) or partisanship (which manifests a sectarian spirit). Such cooperation between believers demonstrates dependence upon God. Though not an assembly decision, Paul acts in the spirit of this when he alerts Timothy of the status of Hymenaeus, Alexander, and Philetus (1 Timothy 1:20; 2 Timothy 2:17-18).

On those occasions when questions arise regarding the righteousness or correctness of a local assembly decision, the acting assembly should be open to the counsel of others, an attitude consistent with the spirit of Proverbs 11:14.

Fellowship: Christ, the tie that binds

The Summary

1. The unity which is born of the Spirit is a unique, universal relationship originating with God, which binds together into one Body every believer redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ.
2. The basis for this relationship is Christ Himself. The Spirit's authoritative testimony concerning the Son is the vehicle through which we can come to faith in the Christ of God, and as such serves as the means for identifying the true believers with whom we are in fellowship. Those who have life in Christ are participants in this fellowship (*Gr. koinonia*), those who do not have this life may not participate in this fellowship.
3. The tragedy of division among believers is a consequence of man redefining God's basis, by including those convictions and practices which – however correct according to Scripture – have no bearing upon whether one truly has life in Christ, or by excluding those convictions which *are* necessary for life in Christ.
4. The fact that God has given us every resource we need to obey His command to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," should embolden us to resist anything which might compromise our appreciation for the reality of our position in Christ, even as it exposes the sin of man's persistent tendency toward sectarianism, division and unbelief.

The Study

On the Day of Pentecost God brought into existence a new and remarkable entity called the Church, comprised of people who, by virtue of their faith in Christ and His work, were separated unto God (1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Acts 2:1-4). Set in a world marked by hostility and war, the Church was divinely enabled to transcend

the traditional divisions of men, and manifest a supernatural relationship which binds together people from every tribe, and language, and people and nation (Revelation 5:9; Acts 4:32-35).

It is impossible for this degree of unity to be achieved by human effort; it can only be created and maintained by the Holy Spirit. There is a fundamental distinction between the unity which is of men (which will inevitably fail; e.g. Genesis 11:3-8, United Nations, the ecumenical movement) and the unity which is of the Spirit (which can never fail; Matthew 16:18), and God calls believers to live in the reality of the latter (Ephesians 4:3). The failure of man to live in concert with the positional reality of our unity in Christ, has resulted in the tragedy of endless division and has brought shame to the name of Christ.

Since we are painfully conscious of the circumstances which gave rise to this conference, we turned to the Scriptures for help in answering the following questions:

- 1. What is the nature of the relationship that binds all believers together?*
- 2. What is the basis for this relationship?*
- 3. How is this relationship expressed?*
- 4. Why is there so much division among the people of God?*

The nature of our relationship.

During the course of our study, we noted how the Scriptures define the nature of this relationship:

Sharing in common. First, the relationship which binds all believers together is far more than a friendship. This relationship is referred to in scripture as “fellowship” and is defined as a “sharing in common” (from the Greek – *koinonia*).

Vertical and horizontal. Second, fellowship is first vertical, then horizontal. Our fellowship originates with God as He calls us into relationship with Himself through the Son (1 Corinthians 1:9; 12:13). It is only as we are called into this relationship with God through Christ that we have fellowship between believers (1 John 1:7; 1 Corinthians 12:14-27). While our horizontal relationships never precede our vertical relationship with God, they do express our fellowship with the Father and with His Son (1 John 1:3).

Positional and practical. Third, our fellowship has both a positional and practical aspect. Our fellowship in Christ (2 Corinthians 13:14; Philippians 2:1) is a

positional reality that is unaffected by human frailty, and is the standard for our practice. Far from being an unachievable ideal, it is a present reality created by the Spirit who indwells each believer.

The call to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" denotes the responsibility of man to live in concert with this reality, even as we submit to the working of the Spirit within. This is the practical aspect of fellowship, and it includes the many activities by which this fellowship is expressed (Acts 2:42-47). Our practice must be consistent with the reality of our fellowship in Christ – a relationship which must extend to *all* believers who clearly evidence life in Christ.

Universal and local. Fourth, fellowship has both a universal and a local aspect. Comprised of every true believer, it transcends all man-made distinctions (1 Corinthians 1:2,9;12:13; Ephesians 2:14-18), and forms the total membership in the Body of Christ. While humans are faced with the obvious limitations of time and space, i.e. it is not physically possible for all believers to meet in the same place at the same time, nevertheless, God sees all believers as belonging in one fellowship, regardless of whether they have ever met, or live in the same geographic area, or subscribe to the same ecclesiastical practices.

The same universal and interdependent membership that characterizes the Body of Christ should be reflected in all local expressions of the Body. The necessity for believers to meet in local gatherings in no way diminishes the universality of the Church, though there is always the danger of man's finite perspective losing sight of the universal reality. In these present circumstances, this tendency has taken the form of a "circle of fellowship" – a concept which is indistinguishable from denominationalism, and has no basis in Scripture.

What is the basis for fellowship?

In the previous section, fellowship was defined by its Greek word, *koinonia* ("a sharing in common"). But what is it that is shared in common? Creeds? Practices? Interpretations? This question was central to our study.

Fellowship not based on doctrine or practice.

For centuries Christians have insisted that fellowship can only be expressed with those who subscribe to commonly held doctrines and practices. Any divergence from that which was considered orthodox consistently resulted in excommunication, division or worse. During our study, the Lord called to our attention the fact that *koinonia* existed long before many of these doctrines and practices were even identified. We were reminded that the first use of a term in Scripture sets the precedent for the meaning of the word as used thereafter.

Thus we observed that *koinonia* is first used in Acts 2:42 following the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (2:1-4), and predates:

The New Testament Scriptures. The earliest writings did not appear until at least 15 years after Pentecost, when the *koinonia* began;

The inclusion of the Gentiles as fellow citizens and members of God's household (Ephesians 2:11–22; Acts 10); and,

The ministry of Paul, through whom God revealed the mystery of the Church (Ephesians 3:1-12; Colossians 1:24-27), the details of our salvation (Romans, Galatians), and the specific instructions governing the practice and administration of the Church (1&2 Corinthians, 1&2 Timothy and Titus).

These facts preclude the possibility that doctrine or practice serve as the *basis* for our fellowship with Christ and, therefore, with His people. The teaching of the apostles referred to in Acts 2:42 was limited to the information they had at the time, and could not have included any of the Church doctrines later introduced by Paul. That doctrine and practice may serve as *evidences* of life in Christ, there is no doubt, but this does not mean that they are the *basis* for fellowship.

Approximately 60 years after Pentecost, the apostle John pointed to the Son as the sole basis for this fellowship (1 John 1:1-4), and its practical expression. We observed that John was careful to point to the Lord Jesus *personally* (the One who was *heard* and *seen* and *touched*), not simply to the teaching *about* Christ – which by this time was well documented in the writings of the apostles.

Christ: the sole basis for fellowship

All this establishes that the basis for our fellowship is Christ Himself *and nothing else*. Every believer who evidences life in Christ is in fellowship with God and with the entire Body of Christ (1 John 5:10-12; Romans 8:9). In this we found an objective criterion which enables believers to walk together in a spirit of peace and mutual edification, and which protects the Church from the many extraneous and subjective “tests” for fellowship which have brought so much division to the Church in an attempt to preserve cultural or denominational distinctives.

We also noted that, though the Spirit's testimony about the Lord Jesus as found in the Scriptures is vital, this testimony is not in itself the *basis* for our fellowship. Instead it serves as the *vehicle* through which we come to know the true Christ who is the basis (Luke 24:27; John 5:39,40). That these teachings are not the basis for fellowship does not in any way detract from their vital importance to the believer.

Identifying the real Christ. When set in the context of the many impostors who plagued the Church through the centuries, accurate teaching about Christ provides the crucial details which distinguish God's Anointed from the pretenders. Since the Lord Jesus is the sole source of salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12), believing in Him brings salvation and life (John 10:10; 20:31); believing in another misses both. Paul was concerned that the Corinthians would accept "another Jesus" (2 Corinthians 11:4), and that the Galatians would embrace "a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6-11). The Spirit of God was careful to provide His testimony concerning the Son, and by this testimony we have an objective and accurate description of the One in Whom we are to believe.

The Spirit's testimony defines those attributes and characteristics of the Lord Jesus which are prerequisite for life in Him, and provides an objective means by which we can identify those teachings of Scripture which – though still important – are not the *basis* for our relationship with Christ, and therefore are not the basis for our fellowship with believers.

According to the Scriptures, the Spirit has authoritatively testified concerning:

The identity of Christ: He is the only One who, being God, became man (John 1:1-3,14; Philippians 2:5-8).

The work of Christ: He is the only One who provided redemption through the shedding of His blood on the cross, and was raised to life by the Father (Acts 2:22-24; Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15:12-17).

Accurate teaching about Christ is unquestionably vital in pointing us to the right Savior. But these teachings still do not *replace* Christ as the basis for fellowship, any more than a photograph can replace the person pictured in the photograph. They do, however, help us to identify those who are truly in fellowship with God through Christ, because no one who *willfully* and *consciously* denies the Son can be a true believer (Hebrews 10:29; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 2:18-23; 4:1-3; 2 John 7).

Fellowship: the birthright of every believer

Once a person evidences life in Christ, no additional designation, qualification or association is needed. From the moment a relationship with Christ is established, the believer is baptized into the Body by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13), and fully qualified for practical fellowship in the Body based simply on the fact of his position in Christ. No provision is made in Scripture for a certain level of maturity to be attained before such privileges can be enjoyed; the pattern of Acts 2 precludes waiting periods or intensive investigations as a general practice.

Furthermore, we could find no precedent in Scripture for an attitude which *receives* believers into fellowship. The Scriptures teach that they are *added* by God (Acts 2:47). The primary responsibility of the Church is to recognize – as far as is humanly possible (through the evidence of life and doctrine) – who has been added to the Church by God, and thus to embrace them in the fellowship of believers. However, the Scriptures do record examples of the early believers showing caution (Acts 9:13-19, 26-27; Romans 16:1,2) since they faced the dual threats of betrayal and false teaching by apostate teachers (Galatians 2:4; 2 Peter 2:1); hence the instruction of Paul in 1 Timothy 5:22,24,25. But none of these precautionary measures were intended to degenerate into suspicion toward believers.

How is fellowship expressed?

We also saw that in its practical expression, it is not possible to distinguish between the various activities of corporate fellowship as if some activities express a higher degree of relationship than others (Acts 2:42). Paul's introduction of Phoebe commended her to the Romans as one worthy of their assistance and fellowship (Romans 16:1,2). Contrary to what has become common practice, Phoebe was not “commended to the breaking of bread,” nor was her fitness for commendation based on the fact that she was breaking bread, but rather on the basis that she was a believer who had been a help to many people. It can be rightly assumed that her fellowship among the Roman believers included, but was not limited to, the breaking of bread.

The danger in making a distinction where Scripture does not, is that it leads us to treat the rite of the Lord's supper as though it were the exclusive privilege of an elite few in the Body of Christ. Since the Scriptures do not make this distinction, it is not Scriptural to enjoy expressions of practical fellowship with believers (Bible study, prayer, service, eating together, etc), and then refuse them the privilege to remember their Lord in the breaking of bread. If we can socialize and serve the Lord, and enjoy the Scriptures together, then we ought also to be able to remember the Lord together. In the entire New Testament, we could not find one example of believers being fit for the various expressions of fellowship, but not the breaking of bread.

Why is there so much division?

As we considered this question, we could not help but consider the context we live in today, in which the Church has been splintered into thousands of sects, each with their own convictions, practices and traditions, and with many of these convictions being mutually exclusive. For example, if one group believes that it is unscriptural to make use of instrumental accompaniment, and another group – meeting at the same place – believes that accompaniment is Biblically permissible, they cannot both have their way. In typical fashion, the ensuing debate would escalate into a

stand for “the truth,” leaving no room for submission and mutual edification. In short order the groups would divide and sever fellowship from one another.

But if we limit ourselves to the Biblically defined basis for fellowship, then it is unwarranted to sever fellowship over such an issue, since this would add musical accompaniment to the basis that God has established (Christ alone). The overwhelming majority of divisions are, therefore, a product of one of two errors:

First, confusing fellowship with harmony. It is important to recognize that a breakdown in harmony should not necessarily prevent one from expressing fellowship with other believers. Unlike the unity born of the Spirit, which is a constant and positional reality, harmony reflects the willingness of believers to consciously agree to walk together *in spite of* differences (Amos 3:3).

When faced with differing convictions regarding doctrine and ecclesiastical practice (those which do not bear on the basis for life in Christ), how are believers to “*keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?*” Though it is assumed that such differences undermine our ability to express fellowship with one another, these differences actually present an *opportunity* for believers to give glory to God by bowing to the preeminence of the Spirit’s unity. When God calls His people to obedience, He always provides the means to obey (2 Peter 1:3), and this is what sets the unity of the Spirit apart from the unity of man: man may aspire to the same ideal, but is powerless to achieve it.

The command to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3) instructs us *how* we are to obey this command. Though positionally this relationship is impervious to human interference, the virtues of humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance and love are essential to its successful expression among men. It is the practice of these virtues of the indwelling Spirit which enable us to “keep the unity of the Spirit *in the bond of peace.*” When Christians sever fellowship over issues which are extraneous to the basis for our fellowship in Christ, then it can only be because we have failed to evidence the virtues which would have enabled us to walk in concert with our position in Christ.

Second, redefining the basis for fellowship to include agreement on ecclesiastical practices and other points of doctrine which have nothing to do with life in Christ.

The very exhortation of the apostle to “*keep the unity of the Spirit*” reflects the universal and persistent tendency of man to act contrary to the Spirit’s unity by imposing man’s own standards and criteria for unity. The concept of unity assumes a diversity that is implicit in “many members” with varied gifts and

personalities. As we noted earlier, diversity poses an insurmountable problem for mere human expressions of unity, and leads men to predicate their unity and fellowship on outward evidences of agreement (e.g. practice, tradition, etc). Thus man errs on two extremes and observes a unity which is either more restrictive than the Spirit's unity (thereby excluding believers who clearly evidence life in Christ – sectarianism), or one broader than the Spirit's unity (thereby including individuals who have no claim to Christ, or whose profession is in doubt – ecumenism).

The Spirit's unity is further distinguished by the fact that it *thrives* on diversity – that it does not exist apart from diversity (1 Corinthians 12, i.e. diversity in matters not pertaining to life in Christ). Were there not diversity of conviction and practice, then there would be no need for the fruit of the Spirit to be in evidence. Human unity, with its emphasis on outward agreement, eliminates the need for the fruit of the Spirit by eliminating or suppressing obvious differences.

We noted that ecclesiastical differences (teachings and practices pertaining to Church governance, the role of women, etc) are not the basis for fellowship, and therefore cannot serve as a basis for believers to cease giving expression to their fellowship. In fact, there is no precedent in Scripture for such actions.

The rule of peace

The question remains: what are we to do in cases where two groups embrace sincere, yet mutually exclusive convictions before God, and cannot in good conscience forego the exercise of these convictions (Romans 14:23)? In such instances the rule of peace provides direction (Romans 14:19; 1 Corinthians 14:33; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Galatians 5:22 Ephesians 4:3; Colossians 3:15, James 3:17):

1. The rule of peace establishes that differing convictions should not result in strife.
2. The rule of peace may lead believers to conclude that the only way they can both act on their convictions is to meet separately.
3. Because the rule of peace is consistent with the nature of the unity of the Spirit, the act of meeting separately does not in any way imply a severing of fellowship. Consequently, each should welcome opportunities to give expression to their fellowship. Failure to do so will inevitably lead to estrangement and, ultimately, a sectarian spirit.
4. The rule of peace does not justify any attempt to form a “circle of fellowship” based on common practice and conviction, since this contradicts the truth of the

One Body. The universal tendency of man toward sectarianism must be diligently guarded against.

5. Finally, the rule of peace must prevail, though all else fail, even when it is clear that both parties must act in accordance with their consciences before God and cannot walk together. If one or both parties have failed to act in humility toward one another, or act to sever fellowship, or part with a spirit of rancor, then they have acted contrary to the unity of the Spirit. The rule of peace means that the very process of parting should be characterized by peace and a spirit of mutual edification.

Awaiting further help from God

It was during this study that we witnessed some diversity of conviction. As the discussion developed, there was no disagreement over the following points:

1. That the sole basis for fellowship between believers is Christ Himself.
2. That there is no distinction in the practical expressions of fellowship, e.g. that remembering the Lord is not a superior expression of fellowship.

And yet when we attempted to work through hypothetical scenarios in which these principles were applied, it became evident that there were differences in actual practice:

On the one hand a few held that some believers are disqualified from breaking bread because they espouse doctrines or practices (both of an ecclesiastical nature) deemed erroneous. This perspective was justified on the basis that such error cannot be condoned by God, and thus should preclude expressing fellowship in the breaking of bread with those who hold such positions.

On the other hand, most in attendance held that the practice outlined in the previous paragraph contradicts the principles identified in the Scriptures for two reasons: First, it effectively redefines the basis for our fellowship with believers. Second, it attempts to elevate the breaking of bread as a superior expression of fellowship, a practice for which no Biblical support is evident. This perspective holds that since the basis for fellowship is Christ alone, then neither differences in understanding nor errors (i.e. errors other than those which preclude life in Christ) in doctrine, practice or attitude cannot disqualify one from fellowship.

It is clear that both convictions cannot be correct, but we found encouragement in the fact that we could now clearly identify a point of difference which we can take to God in prayer for further help and illumination from the Scriptures. We do not perceive these as irreconcilable differences, but as an opportunity to submit to the further instruction of the Holy Spirit.

Fellowship: Finding the limits

The Summary

1. The basis for fellowship is Christ. We express fellowship with all who give clear evidence of life in Christ, and we do not express fellowship with those who do not give clear evidence of life in Christ.
2. Unbelievers have no claim to *koinonia* because they do not have life in Christ. However, believers may socialize with them, and in so doing be a living witness of God's grace.
3. Those who profess faith in Christ but whose lives do not confirm this profession are to be counseled. If it becomes clear that the pattern of their lives is such that there is no evidence of true life in Christ, then they are to be expelled from the assembly.
4. The New Testament writers were especially careful to warn the believers against the teachings and practices of the apostate teachers, who were not believers.
5. It is possible for true believers to teach or practice what is wrong and still give clear evidence of life in Christ. In such instances they are to be patiently counseled, but as long as there is clear evidence of life in Christ, there is no basis for withholding or severing fellowship.

The Study

In the past it has been common practice to express or reject fellowship on the basis of agreement on doctrine and practice; but this position leads ultimately to sectarianism and division. The pride of man is such that he defines as "evil" that which is merely different. Driven by the need to define evil, believers have tended

to categorize it as either doctrinal evil or moral evil, and sometimes as ecclesiastical evil. But these designations have been unsatisfactory because they allow for too much subjectivity and variability.

Given the circumstances which face us all, we looked to the Scriptures for answers to the following questions:

1. Under what circumstances must fellowship be severed or withheld?

2. Why must this action be taken?

The phrase “association with evil defiles” has figured prominently in most discussions on the subject of fellowship. As this study progressed it became increasingly clear that basing a discussion on a phrase that is not found in Scripture results in confusion. This was most apparent when we turned our attention to the subject of “evil,” and found that the confusion surrounding the term is resolved when we confine ourselves to the terms and concepts which God establishes in His Word. Consequently this report attempts to avoid the generic term “evil,” which does not have clear links to *koinonia*, and explores those terms and concepts which are clearly identified.

The test of life

It was a relief to be reminded that, where man introduces confusion and complexity, God brings clarity and simplicity (Psalm 119:130). Contrary to the long and tragic history of the Church, in which man has complicated God’s basis for fellowship, God has kept it simple. Once the true basis for fellowship is accepted it becomes much easier to identify those with whom we may commune. Previously we learned from the testimony of the Scriptures that the basis for fellowship is Christ Himself, and that we may freely express fellowship with any and all who evidence life in Him; indeed it is Christ in whom all true believers are bound together. Conversely, there can be no fellowship with those who do not evidence this relationship with Christ.

The early believers were faced with a variety of circumstances which gave opportunity to flesh out the implications of this truth.

What to do with unbelievers.

Unbelievers have no claim to *koinonia* because they do not have life in Christ (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). And yet the prohibition from fellowship does not preclude social contact with them, regardless of their behavior (1 Corinthians 5:10). Both Paul and the Lord willingly *socialized* with unbelievers ostensibly to win them (1 Corinthians 5:9-10; Luke 5:29-32; 7:33,34; 15:1,2). There is also precedent in Scripture for unbelievers being present for the meetings of the believers, and

even benefitting from these times (1 Corinthians 14:24,25); but this is not the same as participating in the various expressions of fellowship.

What to do with professing believers.

Believers have always faced the sometimes difficult task of distinguishing between those who are true believers, and those who claim to be, but are not. Unlike God who knows our hearts, man can only make judgments based on outward evidences, but such evidences can be deceiving. For example, it is possible for two individuals to evidence the same sinful behavior, with one being a believer, and the other not.

Furthermore, it is possible for two believers to engage in the same sinful behavior with very different motivations. For example, there is a clear and essential difference between those who believe but are still emerging from their past lives (Ephesians 4:17-20), and those who demonstrate a continued resistance to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Care must be taken to respond with discernment. While some behaviors or teachings may truly suggest that the individual in question may not be a believer, the same symptoms may spring from other factors, such as: immaturity in the faith (Philippians 3:15,16), ignorance of doctrine (Acts 18:24-28), a faulty education in the Scriptures, or temptation (James 1:14,15). These factors require that grace be shown over time, and that such individuals should not necessarily be barred from expressing fellowship.

However, there are clear circumstances for which practical fellowship must be severed. Since the beginning, the Church has been plagued by those who profess to be believers, but whose lives give no evidence of the transforming power of Christ. Some are believers, but their life in Christ is obscured by their life of sin; others are Christian in name only, and have never possessed this life. In either case, the simplicity of God's criteria provides clear direction on how these situations are to be addressed, and why.

Believers enslaved to sin. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul expressed alarm at reports he had heard concerning this man who is "called a brother" (1 Corinthians 5:11), but who was living in such flagrant sin that even pagan unbelievers were appalled by it (5:1). Though Paul acknowledges the man's *profession* of faith in Christ, it is also clear that the man's behavior is utterly incompatible with his profession. Thus, Paul's assessment of the man as "that wicked person" (1 Corinthians 5:13) is based on the contradictory testimony of his life rather than his profession.

Though God – Who knows all hearts – is the final and authoritative judge of life, man can discern life based on outward evidences. John provides useful criteria in his first letter in which he contrasts the visible characteristics of believers and unbelievers:

Believers obey God and His Word, unbelievers do not (1 John 2:3-6);

Believers love their brothers, unbelievers do not (2:9-11; 3:10,14);

Believers grow in purity (3:2-3), unbelievers persist in sin (3:6,9,10).

The man in Corinth was “handed over to Satan” (1 Corinthians 5:5) and expelled as a wicked man (5:13) because that is where his behavior suggested he should be. Though he *claimed* to be a believer, his life gave no evidence that his claim was true. It also appears that his seemingly false profession excluded him from all social contact – even contact which believers could legitimately maintain with unbelievers (5:9–11). This suggested to us that God takes our professions very seriously, perhaps because they link us directly to the reputation of His Son, a reputation which He guards with great jealousy.

Since the basis for fellowship is Christ, the man was expelled *because he did not evidence this essential relationship with Christ*. Thus, the simplicity of God’s standard provided an objective and accurate means of assessing and responding to the situation.

It is very significant to note that the man *was* a believer, a fact later established in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11. But again, the basis for his restoration was not a perfect life, but a confirmed testimony of life in Christ as evidenced in his remorse and conviction for his sin (2:5). Until he repented, there was no clear evidence of life.

Apostates. It is no secret that within Christendom there is a broad diversity of belief and practice. It is also true that the “last days” predicted by Paul have come upon us (2 Timothy 3:1-9), and the Truth is being attacked at every hand. In such times it is fitting to be on guard against compromise, but even more so to guard against the universal tendency to attack all differences of teaching and practice as if they are evil. The basis for fellowship established by God restores Christian civility to a process often characterized by bitterness and hostility.

By providing clear warnings against false teachers and their lies, what was God talking about? Do these Scriptures provide a basis for excommunicating all who embrace different convictions, or was God referring to a more serious threat?

In the early decades of the Church, long before the writings of the apostles were collected into what is now the New Testament, believers were taught by itinerant teachers and prophets. While oral instruction was normal for the times, it gave opportunity for false teachers to infiltrate the Church and subvert the faith of many (Galatians 2:4). So it comes as no surprise that the apostles gave strong warnings against these apostate teachers, and clearly identified their most notable characteristics.

We read through several of these passages (1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-9; 4:3,4; 2 Peter 2; and Jude), and from them reviewed a listing of the characteristics of a true apostate (one who rejects the truth). For a sample listing, see Appendix A. The portrait which emerges provides a clear profile by which believers – even young believers inexperienced in the faith (1 John 2:18-23) – can identify those who masquerade as servants of light:

An apostate is motivated by hostility to Christ. We examined John’s epistles, and found repeated warnings against those who evidenced a spirit of being anti-Christ (1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 7). As the name suggests, such an one is motivated by a personal hostility to Christ. Thus, their teaching is more than “just” a wrong teaching *about* Christ (which could be symptomatic of immaturity, ignorance or erroneous teaching); they are distinguished by the fact that they teach what is false about Christ *because they are hostile to Christ*. In the same way, their immoral behavior is more than “just” a sin engaged in by an individual (which could be symptomatic of immaturity, ignorance or temptation); it is distinguished by the fact that it is behavior expressive of *the apostate’s hostility to Christ*. Both the words and deeds are carried out to spite Christ.

An apostate mirrors the character of the evil one. The apostles describe them as being anti-Christ (1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 7), and thus follow in the footsteps of the devil who stands against the Lord Jesus (Luke 4:1-13; John 8:44; Revelation 12).

An apostate is enslaved to sin. There is a clear difference between one who sins (which all believers do – 1 John 2:1,2), and one who is *enslaved* to sin.

An apostate is not content until sin is given expression, and he actively seeks opportunities for that expression (cp Romans 1:28-32).

An apostate will manifest his condition across the entire spectrum of his life, including his attitudes, his speech and his lifestyle (cp 2 Peter 2; Jude).

An apostate consciously and willfully deceives the people until his designs ripen (2 Corinthians 11:13-15; 2 Peter 2:1). Though they may make a convincing profession of faith in Christ, the pattern of life which unfolds over time is in utter contradiction to their profession.

The scriptural evidence suggests that an apostate is not a believer at all. Paul describes them as being ‘depraved’ (2 Timothy 3:8); Jude describes them as ‘godless’ (Jude 4). Peter warns that their destiny is condemnation (2 Peter 2:3; cp Jude 4), and blackest darkness (2 Peter 2:17; cp Jude 13). John asserts that “they went out from us, but did not belong to us” (1 John 2:19). These characterizations are not applicable to believers.

The description and response reserved for apostates is never applied to true believers, even when they are engaged in clear error. In our day, it is important, then, to establish that there is absolutely no warrant for applying these Scriptures to true believers who may embrace different convictions, or even hold teachings which one believes to be in error. If the character of their life is not consistent with the spirit of anti-Christ, then they should not be treated as if they are apostate.

An apostate is necessarily barred not only from expressions of fellowship, but from all contact. Like the man in Corinth, an apostate cannot participate in koinonia because he fails to evidence the prerequisite life in Christ. And, like the man in Corinth, contact is prohibited because of his false profession (2 John 10-11). The malignant and pernicious nature of their sin and attitude against Christ, makes it absolutely essential that they not be placed in a position where they can undermine the faith of those with whom they come into contact. Any influence which draws believers away from Christ will ultimately draw us away from one another.

Discernment needed

Based on the foregoing, fellowship must be withheld from unbelievers. The same criteria holds for those who – in spite of their profession of faith – do not give clear evidence of life in Christ. In such instances believers are commanded to expel them from their midst.

These extreme circumstances are set in contrast to those situations which spring from immaturity, ignorance or erroneous teaching. The response to such is never automatic excommunication from practical fellowship or the withholding of such.

The Biblical precedent is for grace, patience and continued instruction, even in the case of serious error. Paul's letters to the Corinthians, the Galatians and the Colossians contain much corrective ministry. These believers were either being tempted by, or were engaged in, serious error – both doctrinally and morally. And yet in no instance does he threaten to excommunicate them, but employs his own attitude expressed in 2 Timothy 2:23-26.

Further clarifications

One of the great tragedies of the Church has been the persistent and universal tendency to define and treat as evil that which is “merely” error. Even worse has been the tendency to define and treat as evil that which is a difference of methodology or sincere conviction. Such carelessness reflects a truly sectarian spirit which is, in itself, a denial of the positional reality of our shared fellowship in Christ, and thus represents an ecclesiastical error.

During our study, we found no evidence in Scripture of a person who was excommunicated or barred from fellowship on the basis of a difference of ecclesiastical practice (except for those whom Diotrephes prevented from ministering; 3 John 9,10). The Scriptures do record that such differences did exist (1 Corinthians 11:16). That Paul responds so strongly to aberrations from his teaching has more to do with challenges to his apostolic authority in establishing the doctrinal foundation for the Church. It is significant to note that he stops well short of acting to excommunicate those who challenged his teaching. The fact that he takes bold action against the man (not the assembly) in 1 Corinthians 5, establishes that he could well have employed this option, a fact which makes his restraint all the more significant.

For many years a pattern has been observed in which believers in clear fellowship with Christ have been labeled as evil by virtue of differences in ecclesiastical practice. This labeling has been used as the basis for them from the breaking of bread. In some instances, their communion has even been referred to as the “table of demons.” Far from being an unfortunate attitude or a mere imbalance, this behavior needs to be viewed as a sin, and as an affront to Christ Himself. There is absolutely no basis for withholding the privileges of practical fellowship from those with whom we are already enjoying positional fellowship in Christ. Though there may be some limitations to the full exercise of walking together on every point, these limitations should in no way be confused with fellowship.

Defilement: The motivation of the heart

The summary

1. The Law addressed many issues of defilement, both moral and ceremonial. For the Jew defilement was not a theological abstraction, but a daily reality which threatened the moral fiber of the nation as well as the health of the people.
2. According to the Lord's teaching on defilement, a man is made unclean by the sin which emanates *from his own heart*, and not by contact with others who sin.
3. The Lord's teaching on defilement corrected the traditions of the Pharisees and served as the basis for the teaching and practices of the early Church.
4. Throughout the entire New Testament, there is not a single direct reference to leprosy as a metaphor for sin.
5. Leaven (yeast) described in 1 Corinthians 5 is not to be taken as a type of sin. It is an illustration of the active, self-extending nature of sin that, unless judged, will influence others to engage in the same.
6. It is not possible to be "defiled" by expressing fellowship with believers of other traditions because they observe different ecclesiastical practices.

The study

On the last full day of the conference we turned our attention to the subject of defilement, and were gratified that the Lord had unexpected insights to show us from His Word. In particular we sought an answer to the following question:

Can an individual believer or an assembly be defiled by association with others who sin?

The answer to this question is important, because – as our present experience has demonstrated – even small differences of interpretation will lead to vastly different perspectives and practices.

It has been commonly held that an individual or group can be contaminated (defiled) by the sins of others simply by coming into contact with them. This view creates a “chain of defilement” which suggests that contamination can be transmitted even through individuals who – though personally innocent – are in contact with others who are engaged in flagrant sin.

This teaching necessitates an exclusive fellowship that is practiced in isolation from all perceived sources of potential defilement, sources which include denominational affiliations and ecclesiastical practices. The end result is that true believers who walk in communion with Christ are denied the full privileges of fellowship.

What did the early believers know?

Since the initial composition of the Church was exclusively Jewish, the early believers enjoyed a familiarity with the Law which gave them an uncommon appreciation for the Old Testament concept of defilement. This familiarity gives significance to the practices of the early Church because, if they had continued the application of the Levitical law regarding defilement, then we could rightly deduce that the Lord intended for these practices to be normative for our day.

A number of Scriptures have been used to support such applications, most notably the law of the leper (Leviticus 13 ff), and defilement by contact with a dead body (Numbers 19; Haggai 2:12-14). Throughout the Old Testament, and especially the Pentateuch, the concept of defilement looms large in the daily lives of God's chosen people. Because the God who called them was holy, they were to be holy as well (Leviticus 11:44,45; 19:2; 20:7). In calling the Jews out from the nations, God used their distinctiveness as a testimony against the perverted practices of the nations, as well as for the matchless superiority of the God whom they served, and Who dwelt among them (Deuteronomy 4:3-8; Exodus 29:45 & 46). Any compromise in the holy character of His people, would reflect negatively upon the reputation of the

name of the Lord (Leviticus 21:6), and potentially result in God no longer dwelling among His people (Exodus 33:1-6; 1 Kings 8:57-61; 9:6-9).

But the Jews were surrounded by many influences which opposed the holiness of God, and threatened their character as His people. The beliefs and practices of the surrounding pagans were more than just different, they were thoroughly perverted. Thus the regulations and procedures of the Law were designed not only to identify the expectations of a holy God for the moral character of His people (the moral law, e.g., Exodus 20:1-17), but went far beyond that and served as a protection against health hazards, and established dietary standards as well (Leviticus 11-15 are examples).

Because only God's people had these laws and regulations (Deuteronomy 4:3-8), the failure to keep them would render the people of God indistinguishable from the nations. To protect His people, God's law repeatedly warned them against the dangers which could truly threaten them.

The Lord's teaching

We noted earlier that the early Church was nurtured on the ministry of the apostles as they recounted the teachings of Christ Himself. For example, the disciples were present when the Lord confronted the Pharisees who had constructed elaborate interpretations of the Law concerning the nature and mechanics of defilement which placed undue emphasis on externals while disregarding the motivations of the heart (Matthew 15:1-20; 23:25-28; Mark 7:14-23).

The Lord's very public rebuke of their hypocrisy and further exposition to the disciples brought God's purpose back into focus. His teaching effectively reversed the commonly held, but erroneous perception that a man was made unclean by his external contacts. Instead, the Lord establishes that a man is made unclean by what emanates from his own heart. This teaching became part of the foundation for the understanding and practice of the early Church.

The Gentiles made clean

For example, it would seem that even the apostles, in spite of their first hand knowledge of the teaching and example of the Lord, did not understand all at once the full implications of Jesus' teaching. When the Lord called Peter to go to the Gentiles, He prepared Peter for the task by sending him the vision of the great sheet descending from heaven and filled with various animals, some of which were considered unclean by Levitical law. Not surprisingly, Peter appealed to his traditional understanding of the concept of defilement and objected to eating these animals (Acts 10).

The Lord's instruction to not "make common" that which God has "cleansed" was clearly aimed not so much at the food as it was at Peter's impending association

with a Gentile. Equipped with this knowledge from the Lord, Peter went without hesitation to the house of Cornelius, knowing that his association with a Gentile would not render him impure before God. He was safe, not because he had redefined God's standard to suit his purposes, but because he could rest in the assurance that God had made Gentiles - as a class - clean. Though Peter understood this, the difficulty of getting free of the legalism of the Pharisees is underscored in his later refusal to eat with Gentile believers as recounted by Paul in Galatians 2:11-13.

The teaching of the Pharisees

All of these activities of the early Church with regard to defilement were consistent with the Lord's teaching in Matthew 15 and Mark 7. What is significant is that the Lord's teaching is not limited to contact between ethnic groups (as is the case with Acts 8 and 10), but the teaching goes even further to apply to sin (Mark 7:21-23). If it is true that being in the presence of the previously despised Samaritans and Gentiles did not any longer defile a Jew, then the same principle must apply to being in the presence of those who sin. James (1:13-15) reflects the same perspective as he states that sin flows out of a man's own heart, thus negating any attempt to blame outside influences for the sins which originate from within. Unlike the Pharisees who had become obsessed with the notion that they could be morally defiled by their contacts with external sources of contamination, the early Church benefitted from the clear and simple teaching of the Lord and His apostles which established that an individual (and by extension - the Church) can be made 'unclean' only by the sins which originate in their own heart. Therefore an individual or assembly is not held accountable to God as a result of proximity to those who sin, but for sin in their heart.

1 Corinthians 5

This is the point of Paul's instruction to the Corinthians regarding the adulterous believer. Though it is clear that the sinner is to be expelled from the church (5:13), Paul also condemns the attitude of the Corinthians whose own pride and complacency had tolerated the sin and brought even more shame to the name of Christ (5:2,6). Their pride had blinded them to what should have been an obvious fact: that sin, when left unjudged, influences others to the same end (cp 1 Corinthians 15:33). Paul's use of leaven (yeast) provides a familiar metaphor to help the Corinthians understand the pervasive influence of unjudged sin (5:6-8).

Given the backdrop of the Lord's own teaching on the true source of defilement (one's own heart), care must be taken to interpret and apply Paul's instructions here in a manner that is consistent with the Lord's teaching and not the teaching of the Pharisees. This conviction was reinforced throughout the session as the Lord gave us further insights which clarified the meaning of the passage:

The end of leprosy. Though leprosy has been commonly applied as a type of sin, and has therefore been used to teach the concept of defilement by contact (using the imagery of a contagious disease), we could not help but see great significance in the fact that throughout the entire New Testament, there is not a single direct reference to leprosy as a metaphor for sin. Certainly the disease had not lost any of its terror, and would have served as a powerful and familiar metaphor. But God's silence was made even more profound when we remembered that the Lord healed the lepers (Luke 5:12-13), a miracle which He performed by actually touching the untouchable!

The power of influence. In 1 Corinthians 5, leaven is not the issue, but rather the spread of leaven, an illustration of how unjudged sin can influence others to engage in the same. Paul's instruction is consistent with the Lord's teaching in that he strongly warns the Corinthians against the threat of being influenced by another's sin (1 Corinthians 5:6), but this is not the same as being judged for another's sin. In this passage, the adulterous relationship was the catalyst which exposed the hearts of both the adulterer and the Corinthians. When the man committed and persisted in his adulterous relationship, he was judged on the basis of his own sin. When the Corinthians grew proud and did not mourn about the situation, they were judged on the basis of their own sin (pride), not the sin of the man. Unlike the teaching of the Pharisees which would have condemned the Corinthians for the sin of the man, Paul maintains the essence of the Lord's teaching that a man is made unclean by what emanates from his own heart, and not by contact with others.

2 Timothy 2:14-21

This passage has been addressed in an earlier section, but a few comments here are warranted. Though often used to support the teaching of the Pharisees (defilement by contact), the context is concerned with the public ministry of God's servants (e.g. Timothy) and describes how improper relationships can compromise the credibility and effectiveness of their ministry. Timothy is being warned against any relationship with individuals like Hymeneas and Philetus - apostates who had introduced heresy to the churches.

It is notable that Paul references yet another metaphor for sin, this time it is gangrene ('a canker'). The imagery of rotting flesh is suitably applied to the heretical teaching of these apostate teachers, and focuses upon its spreading influence (cp leaven). The point of the metaphor is that whatever form sin takes - behavior or teaching - when left unjudged it influences others to do the same things or to adopt the same teaching.

The instruction for Timothy to turn away from such wickedness, and to cleanse himself from these 'dishonorable vessels' reflects the reality that the failure to condemn these men and their teaching would imply a tacit endorsement of their heresy.

His continued tolerance of this heresy would therefore nullify his ministry by compromising the Lord's willingness to use him. To apply this passage to godly believers not 'identified' with a given 'circle of fellowship' is an abuse of the Scripture.

Three principles

When taken together, the instruction of the Lord coupled with the inspired instruction of the apostles establishes three useful principles:

Principle 1: A man is held accountable to God for the sin that emanates from his own heart, and not the sin of others.

Principle 2: Sin, when left unjudged, influences others to engage in the same. The teachings and warnings of the apostles are aimed squarely at putting a halt to the pernicious influence of sin, by clearly judging it and expelling those who persist in unjudged sin.

Principle 3: It is sin (from within) that makes one unclean. Any attempt to apply this principle to ecclesiastical differences of practice has no basis in scripture and therefore evidences a sectarian spirit, which is itself a sin (Galatians 5:20). Therefore, it is not possible to be 'defiled' by expressing fellowship with believers of other traditions simply because they observe different ecclesiastical practices.

Note:

After the conference, a question was raised concerning the teaching of 2 John 7-11. Like other passages we have reviewed in this report, the context of 2 John does not permit its use as a proof text for defilement by association. The focus of the passage is apostasy, and the apostle's warning addresses the danger of implied endorsement of the teachings of these apostate teachers (who denied the incarnation of the Lord Jesus). Thus, those who welcome them are partakers in their evil deeds because their welcome implies a *de facto* endorsement. Since the apostle is warning against apostasy, it would be unwarranted to use this passage as a basis for barring from practical fellowship believers who clearly evidence life in Christ, but who observe different ecclesiastical practices.

The Body: Bridging the gap

The Summary

1. If a believer is in fellowship with God through Christ as evidenced in his beliefs and conduct, then God sees him as being in fellowship, and all believers are therefore obligated before God to give expression to that fellowship, including the breaking of bread.
2. There are circumstances which may necessitate limiting the full expression of fellowship for the purpose of discipline and restoration. This teaching may apply to divisive people as well as idle, lazy Christians. In each case the instruction to not associate with them has nothing to do with excommunication - the complete severing of fellowship with the body of Christ.
3. In matters of sincere disagreement believers may elect to meet separately for the sake of harmony. But this physical separation does not in any way imply or justify a severing of fellowship.
4. The teaching of 1 Corinthians 10 referring to the table of the Lord and the table of demons contrasts Christianity and paganism. This teaching cannot be used to justify withholding fellowship from true believers of differing conviction and practice.
5. Though the reputation of the Church may be ruined in the eyes of the world, this perspective cannot be used as justification for withholding fellowship from believers of differing conviction and practice.

The Study

There is no question that the Church at the end of the twentieth century bears little outward resemblance to the Church of the first century. What began in simplicity and clear demonstrations of the power of the Word and the Spirit, has degenerated into an institution tarnished by the scourges of division, weakness and compromise. On the surface it appears that the prayer of the Lord Jesus remains unanswered (John 17:20-23).

With so many different beliefs and practices held by Christians around the globe, with so many denominational identities, with whom can the conscientious believer fellowship? Typically believers have advocated a variety of responses, ranging from complete isolation to total integration. Many groups have permitted varying degrees of fellowship with other Christians, but have drawn the line at various teachings and practices which often reflect their particular denominational identity.

There is a need for an objective basis for making such a determination that protects one from the subtle deceptions of a sectarian spirit. It was against this backdrop that we turned our attention on the last session of the conference to consider the following question:

To what degree can believers of different convictions and traditions have practical fellowship together?

Principles in review

Much of this discussion was built on the foundation of principles established in earlier sessions. The discussion was, in effect, an application of these principles to the reality in which we find ourselves. For this reason, a review of some of the pertinent principles will be helpful in establishing a perspective:

1. The Church is comprised of every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. Local expressions of the Body are reflections of the universal Church.
3. The unity of the Spirit is a unique, universal relationship originating with God, which binds together into one Body every believer redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. Scripture provides no basis for the concept of a 'circle of fellowship' smaller than the entire Body of Christ.
4. The basis for this unity is Christ Himself, not the teaching about Christ and His work, but Christ personally.

5. Division among believers is usually a consequence of man adding to God's basis, and includes those convictions and ecclesiastical practices which - however correct according to Scripture - have no bearing upon the positional reality of one's fellowship with God through Christ.
6. Believers are called into a fellowship with God through Christ, and, on that basis, with one another. This fellowship has many practical expressions, of which the breaking of bread is only one. Scripture grants no particular status to this specific expression.
7. We found no example in Scripture of a person who was excommunicated or barred from fellowship on the basis of a difference of ecclesiastical practice.
8. It is not possible to be 'defiled' by expressing fellowship with believers of other traditions simply because they observe different ecclesiastical practices.

One simple question

Armed with an awareness of these principles, we found the application of them to be complicated only by man's unwillingness to act on the basis of God's perspective. The teaching which promotes the exclusion of true believers, who are therefore in fellowship with Christ, is sectarian in character, and therefore at odds with the teaching of the Scriptures.

When faced with the issue of fellowship with any believer or group of believers, one need only ask one simple question:

Do they give clear evidence of life in Christ?

If the answer to the question is 'yes', then God sees them as being in fellowship, and all believers are therefore obligated before God to give expression to that fellowship, including the breaking of bread.

Limitations to fellowship

The criterion outlined above provides an objective baseline for establishing who we are in fellowship with, and protects us from both sectarianism and ecumenism. And yet, we also examined Biblical evidence which indicates that there are specific circumstances in which the full expression of fellowship may be limited to a degree.

Discipline

There are those occasions when believers stand in need of correction or rebuke for behaviors or attitudes which disrupt harmony among believers. Likewise, there are occasions when believers engage in willfully persistent sinful behav-

ior which calls for a response. While the latter is important to consider, this was not the focus of our study and so we confine this report to the sometime missapplied passages related to divisiveness, idleness and apostasy.

Divisiveness. On at least two occasions Paul warns the believers to not associate with those who promote division (Romans 16:17-19; Titus 3:9-11). Though the warning is quite strong, Paul stops short of specifying excommunication (note that when the situation so warranted as in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul did not hesitate to prescribe excommunication).

Divisiveness is a character trait which threatens harmony within the Body, and is not necessarily limited to false teaching (e.g. Romans 16 specifies false teaching; Titus 3 does not). In both referenced situations divisiveness addresses the manner in which a person conducts himself, rather than the specific issue being debated.

The prescription for such behavior is isolation, not excommunication, as is reflected in the instruction to warn the heretical man twice (Titus 3:10).

Idleness. Paul also warns the believers against the danger of laziness (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15), and instructs them not to associate with those who are. On the surface the instruction to not associate with lazy believers appears the same as the response prescribed in 1 Corinthians 5:11 — a response which was coupled with excommunication. But again, Paul is careful to make a distinction, and thus his instruction in 2 Thessalonians 3 cannot be construed as excommunication for two reasons:

First, Paul clearly identifies that the idle person is a true believer (3:6,15). The man in 1 Corinthians 5 was excommunicated because his behavior contradicted his profession, and Paul refers to him as wicked.

Second, Paul specifies that, though their behavior is at odds with his teaching on the subject of responsibility, lazy believers are not hostile to Christ, and therefore should not be perceived as ‘enemies’ (3:6,14,15).

The purpose for this action is correction. In addition to being involved in a sinful life style, idle people are a plague to others, sapping time and energy. It is for these reasons that responsible believers are commanded to rebuke the idleness.

Apostasy. Two other passages call believers to disassociate themselves from professing believers whose teaching is truly hostile to Christ (2 John

7-11 and 2 Timothy 2:14-21). In each case the character of the teacher is such that there is strong reason to question the reality of their profession because of their teaching. John calls them deceivers and anti-christs (2 John 7), and Paul cites Hymenaeus whose blasphemous teaching undermined the faith of many believers (2 Timothy 2:17,18; cp 1 Timothy 1:20). Therefore, neither of these passages can be used to provide any pretext for withholding fellowship from genuine and sincere believers whose doctrine and practice may differ.

Disagreement

As we noted in an earlier session, many divisions between believers are the result of an inability to agree on doctrines or practices. We noted then that unless this disagreement centers around beliefs or practices which call into question the reality of fellowship with God through Christ, any movement toward severing fellowship is unjustified. We further noted that there are circumstances in which genuine believers can come to opposing convictions regarding a variety of doctrines and practices. In such cases, if both are convinced that they must honor their convictions before God, then for the sake of harmony, it may be prudent to meet separately.

However, it is important to recognize that this physical separation does not in any way imply or justify a severing of fellowship. Believers of both convictions are obligated before God to act on the basis of the Spirit's unity, and continue to express fellowship with one another whenever the opportunity arises.

Furthermore, because the breaking of bread is an expression of the fellowship of believers with Christ and each other, it is inappropriate to prevent believers of different convictions from participating in this expression of fellowship. To do so would deny the essential unity of the Body and add to the basis for our fellowship, which is Christ alone. As we observed earlier, if a person is unfit to participate in the breaking of bread, then they are unfit for any expression of fellowship. Mere disagreement between genuine believers over doctrines and practices does not meet this criterion.

We noted that even in the early Church there were clear divergences of doctrine (doctrine having nothing to the basis of fellowship with God in Christ). While the apostles take note of such divergences (1 Corinthians 11:16 is an example), they never suggest that such individuals be excluded from the fellowship of the believers.

A question of identification

During the course of the conference, concerns were raised regarding the implications of fellowshiping with believers whose doctrine and practice are believed to be in error. It was presented that, based on the teaching of 1 Corinthians 10:16-33 (esp.16-22), the act of breaking bread with individuals who espouse such error is

seen to be equivalent to endorsing their error, and essentially identifies one with their error.

We examined the passage, and again found the context to be very helpful in defining the purpose and scope of the instruction:

The context. It is essential to see that Paul is contrasting the table of the Lord (at which all genuine believers partake), with the table of demons (at which unbelieving pagans partake). His concern was for believers who had not made a complete break from their pagan past and apparently were physically participating in both (10:21,22).

One Loaf, One Cup, One Body. We also noted that any attempt to identify the communion of ‘other’ believers as the table of demons, and thus to establish a pretext for refusing them fellowship to any degree, is utterly false and cannot in any way be supported by Paul’s instruction. Paul’s teaching looks beyond the local expressions of the Body and sees the Church in its universal aspect. Just as each local assembly is but a representation of the entire Body of Christ, so the individual loaves or cups of which believers partake are only local representations of the One Loaf and the One Cup of which all believers everywhere partake. Though there are many believers, all participate in this universal expression of the One Body!

A universal fellowship. Though sectarian man sees many tables, many cups, many loaves, each representing many creeds, God sees only One (Christ). When true believers meet — however frequently — to participate in the body and blood of the Lord, they are at that moment literally expressing fellowship with Christ, and, by extension, with all true believers everywhere. This is true even of those who do not consider themselves to be in fellowship with ‘other’ believers! For this reason it is unsound to deny expressions of fellowship to ‘other’ believers since all are already expressing fellowship with one another.

A warning against blasphemy. This portion of the discussion included a strong warning about the danger of treating local representations of the table of the Lord as if they were representations of the table of demons. This attitude borders on blasphemy as it attributes to the Lord’s table the character of demons! Such is the implication of a sectarian spirit.

The ruin of the Church

Another concern addressed the current state of the Church. Having been fractured into thousands of sects, the Church is commonly viewed as being in ruin. We could not help but note that - like the phrase ‘association with evil defiles’, the phrase, ‘the ruin of the Church’ is not found in the Scriptures. While none would deny that the testi-

mony of the Church has been seriously compromised, humans are still not granted the authority to pronounce the Church to be in ruins.

In assuming the Church to be in ruins, it has been held that this condition makes it impractical, if not impossible, to truly act on the basis of the one Body of Christ. This perception is then used as a justification for withholding fellowship from believers in good standing with Christ.

A positional reality. We previously noted that true fellowship has a positional and practical aspect. The positional aspect is not a theoretical ideal, but reality as God sees it. The practical aspect reflects the responsibility of man to live in concert with the positional reality. Man's failure to live up to God's standard never nullifies this reality nor the related obligations. Thus, to assert that the perceived ruin of the Church justifies the severing of fellowship between believers is completely at odds with God's view of the Church.

An illustration from marriage. The Lord's teaching on marriage and divorce (Matthew 5:31,32; 19:3-10) was cited to help illustrate the relationship between our position and practice. The marriage of a man and woman is a reality constituted before God which cannot be altered by any perceived failure of the marriage. The unbreakable union of the marriage serves to motivate the everyday behaviors and attitudes which help the couple to truly live in the spirit of that union before God (Ephesians 5:22-33).

Like the Church, it is a sad reality that humans do not honor this union. By failing to submit to the instruction of the Lord for a healthy marriage, the visible union breaks down, and the couple seek a legal divorce. Armed with a certificate of divorce, humans make the mistake of assuming that because the marriage appears to be ruined and is legally ended, they are then free to remarry. But the Lord clearly teaches that any subsequent marriage (noting the exceptions He cites), constitutes an adulterous relationship. The only way the subsequent marriage can be viewed as adulterous, is if the first marriage is still in force. Consequently, when God establishes something in heaven, there is no act of man that can annul heaven's reality. Man is always responsible to pursue the standard that God sets by submitting to the resources God grants for the purpose (2 Peter 1:3-11).

And so it is with the Church. The union born of the Spirit is indissoluble. Though the union may appear ruined from man's perspective, God's standard and expectation never changes. In this we come back full circle to the simple, objective basis for fellowship: Christ Himself. Our fellowship is not based on the ruin of the Church, the ground of the one body, ecclesiastical practices, or agreement. All these foundations will fail, leaving Christ alone as the only thing which all true believers hold in common.

Conclusion: A call to repentance

On the final morning of the conference in Lake Geneva, an urgent and heartfelt appeal was made for brethren to look beyond the doctrines and positions at stake, and to allow God to bring each to a place of personal humiliation and repentance.

We were challenged by the thought that we are faced with clear evidence of God's hand of judgment upon us, and that the only fitting response is to submit to God by confessing our failure to live by His Word, not only in our doctrinal positions, but also in our personal lives and attitudes as well. We spent some time in 2 Corinthians 7, especially verse 11, and found in Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians timely insight which can help us in our present circumstances.

True repentance is a response to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit within. It was our prayer as we concluded the conference that God would indeed work in all of our hearts so that we would all be vessels, each truly fit for the Master's use.

Appendix A: The face of apostasy

Their character

1 Timothy 4:1-3

Hypocrites
Liars
Seared in their conscience

2 Timothy 3:1-5

Lovers of self
Lovers of money
Boastful
Proud
Abusive
Rebellious
Without love
Unforgiving
Slanderous
Without self-control
Brutal
Treacherous
Rash
Conceited
Lovers of pleasure
Outwardly religious
Sexual predators
Oppose the truth
Depraved

2 Peter 2

Deceptive
Greedy
Exploitative
Despiteful of authority
Bold
Arrogant
Blasphemous
Brute beasts
Creatures of instinct
Adulterous
Persistent in sin
Experts in greed
Springs without water
Mists driven by storms
Slaves of depravity

Jude

Godless
Dreamers
Shepherds who feed only themselves
Clouds without rain
Barren trees
Grumblers
Fault finders
Boastful
Flatterers
Scoffers
Divisive

Their methods

Secretly introduce destructive heresies (2 Peter 2, Jude)
Make up stories to exploit the simple (2 Peter 2)
Slander celestial beings (2 Peter 2)
Carouse (2 Peter 2)
Seduce (2 Peter 2)
Entice (2 Peter 2)
Reject authority (Jude)
Speak abusively against things they don't understand (Jude)

Their motivations

Deceitful, demonic spirits (1 Timothy 4:1-3)
Lustful (2 Timothy 3:1-9)
Corrupt desires of the sinful nature (2 Peter 2)
Natural instincts (Jude)

Their teachings

Forbidding marriage (1 Timothy 4:1-3)
Abstinence from certain foods (1 Timothy 4:1-3)
Deny the Lord and His work of redemption (2 Peter 2:1)
Blasphemy (2 Peter 2)
Empty, boastful words (2 Peter 2)
Appeal to the lustful desires of the sinful human nature (2 Peter 2)
Promise freedom that is false (2 Peter 2)
Promote immorality (Jude)
Deny Jesus Christ (Jude)

God's response:

They are condemned (2 Peter 2)
Their judgment is looming (2 Peter 2)
They will perish (2 Peter 2)
Retribution is waiting (2 Peter 2)
Blackest darkness is reserved for them (2 Peter 2)
Better for them not to have known the way of righteousness (2 Peter 2)

Appendix B: Bible study

In the weeks following the conference, a number of individuals and assemblies have expressed interest in the material covered, reflecting their desire to study the Scriptures for themselves. We rejoice in this, knowing that the Spirit of God will confirm whatever is true, and debunk all that is not. We strongly encourage individuals and assemblies to meet to study these issues. One of the grievous failures associated with these current circumstances has been the tendency to accept the views of others without question. Such an attitude can only result in disaster as God's people move further away from the source of all Truth.

The following study guide is intended to assist those who have interest in studying the subject for themselves. We have simply listed the questions we considered, along with a few suggested Scriptures for reference. These references are by no means exhaustive, but serve as a place to begin.

A few recommendations are in order:

1. Resolve to set aside the writings of men, and confine yourself to the Word of God.
2. Spend time going over the section on Hermeneutics. It is essential that everyone agree on how the Scripture is to be interpreted. The failure to do this will undermine any subsequent discussion.
3. Avoid random conversations without focus. We found it very helpful to identify a few questions, arrange them in a logical order, and work through them.
4. Stick to the question under consideration. Don't move on until it is answered, or until the group decides to let it rest pending further study.
5. Conclude each session by identifying areas of agreement, and areas which need further study. Do not consider the latter to be a failure; these provide opportunity for the Spirit of God to do great things.

6. In all things, “set a watch on your lips” (Psalm 141:3). Avoid debate. Embrace a spirit of brethren studying together to discover what is true. Set aside personal agendas. God will confirm what is true in His time and way.
7. Beware of those who make demands, issue ultimatums, or urge haste. All such actions and attitudes will undermine the spirit of patient study under the authority of God’s Word. The time to come to conclusions is when God has granted clarity.

The Church:

1. Is a decision by a local assembly ratified by heaven and, therefore, binding upon all other assemblies?
2. Is there a Biblical basis for one assembly to excommunicate another assembly, or to sever ties of fellowship?

References:

Matthew 16:19; 18:19–20
Acts 15
Ephesians 1:22-23
2 Timothy 2
Revelation 2–3

Fellowship 1:

1. What is the nature of the relationship that binds all believers together?
2. What is the basis for this relationship?
3. How is this relationship expressed?
4. Why is there so much division among the people of God?

References

Acts 2:42–47
1 Corinthians 1:2,9; 12
Ephesians 2:11-3:12; 4:1-6
1 John 1:1–4

Fellowship 2:

1. Under what circumstances must fellowship be severed or withheld?
2. Why must this action be taken?

References

1 Corinthians 5
2 Corinthians 6:14-18
1 Timothy 4:1-3
2 Timothy 3:1-9; 4:3,4
2 Peter 2
1 John 2-3
2 John 7-11
Jude

Defilement:

1. Can an individual believer or an assembly be defiled by association with others who sin ?

References

Matthew 15:1-20; 23:25-28
Mark 7:14-23
Acts 10
1 Corinthians 5
Galatians 2:11-13
2 Timothy 2:14-21
2 John 7-11

The Body:

1. To what degree can believers of different convictions and traditions have practical fellowship together?

References

Romans 14; 15; 16:17-19
1 Corinthians 10:16-33
2 Thessalonians 3:6-15
Titus 3:9-11
Matthew 15:31-32; 19:3-10

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