

A STUDY OF THE SCRIPTURAL TEACHING
CONCERNING EXCOMMUNICATION AND TERMINATION OF FELLOWSHIP:
THEIR RELATION TO EACH OTHER AND THEIR APPLICATION.

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The general topic assigned me by the 1960 Watertown convention of our church was entitled, "Excommunication and Suspension or Termination of Fellowship". Before proceeding with work on the assignment I took the liberty of eliminating one of the three terms, namely, suspension of fellowship. It was my judgment that the purpose of this paper could best be served by not entering into the matter of suspension of fellowship.

To me suspension of fellowship, if it is to be used at all, must be used as a prelude to termination of fellowship. Suspension, according to definition: "a state of deferment", must be inconclusive. When used in connection with the application of Romans 16:17, suspension of fellowship, unless carefully used and properly safe-guarded, can be dangerous and subject to misuse by those who wish to make a pretense of obedience to the Word of God while at the same time undermining the solid foundation of faithfulness to the Word of God and subverting the truth. However, the question of the use of suspension of fellowship in connection with termination of fellowship could well be the subject of study by itself.

We will therefore confine ourselves to the consideration of excommunication and termination of fellowship under the theme: "A Study of the Scriptural Teaching Concerning Excommunication and Termination of Fellowship: Their Relation to Each Other and Their Application."

I.

THE SCRIPTURAL TEACHING CONCERNING EXCOMMUNICATION AND TERMINATION OF FELLOWSHIP

Though the familiar term "excommunication" is not to be found in the King James translation of the Bible, the act which it describes for us is clearly set forth in Scripture. Our Lord Jesus Christ gives us instruction concerning the matter in Matt. 18. There we are told how to proceed when a brother in the faith trespasses against another brother.

The word trespass as found in this section of Matthew 18, beginning with the 15th verse, is not limited as to the degree or intensity of the sin. It is quite clear, however, that not every sin against us by a brother is to involve us in the serious admonition here set forth. Certainly we do not think of Matthew 18 each time we take note of the many daily sins of weakness that are all too often prevalent among brethren in the faith. In the many sins of weakness that we behold, the child of God, aware of the beam that is in his own eye, is not inclined to make a pious fuss about

the mote or sliver in his brother's eye. (Matt. 7:3-5). Aware of his own weakness and rejoicing in the Lord's daily mercy and forgiveness that never fails, the believer gladly follows God's instruction through Peter, "But above all things have fervent charity (love) among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8). Thus, in joyful reflection of the free, forgiving grace of God, children of God "add to brotherly kindness, charity." (2 Peter 1:7).

In Matthew 18 we are instructed on our responsibility when manifest trespasses of a more serious nature come to our attention. They are not more serious, however, because they hurt and offend the brother who is sinned against more deeply, but rather because they place the soul of the offending brother in jeopardy. Luther in his "Exhortation to the Clergy at Augsburg", speaking of the ban or excommunication, says, "It (excommunication) should be

for the punishment of public offenses such as robbery, drunkenness, also heresy, blasphemy and the like; for our Lord teaches in Matthew 18:17 that the ban shall be put upon those who will not hear the church or congregation. Thus the church teaches in harmony with the Word of God." (Works of Martin Luther. Philadelphia Edition. Vol. 4, p. 352).

Verse 15 of Matthew 18 notes that a believer is aware of such a trespass on the part of a fellow believer. He recognizes that this trespass places the soul of the sinning brother in danger. Our Lord sets forth the narrowest possible situation: the sin is known to only one. Love is to move that brother to action. Jesus says to him, "Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone." He is to earnestly apply the appropriate Word of God to the prevailing sin, in order that the sinning brother may be led to repentance by the Spirit of God. If the prayed for repentance is brought about, the outcome will be most happy; for the Savior says, "If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." The matter is closed and forgotten and the two brethren rejoice together in the grace of God as here-to-fore.

Verse 18, however sets forth the other possibility: "But if he will not hear thee." Every effort has failed to achieve the desired result. However, all hope for the sinning brother is not to be abandoned; Jesus says, "Take with thee one or two more that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." Love and concern for the erring brother is to lead to a broadened effort to gain the brother, while at the same time establishing before witnesses both the fact of the sin and the impenitence, that it, the unwillingness of the offending brother to acknowledge the authority of the Word of God. Surely the two or three as fellow believers will not be satisfied merely to act as witnesses, but will seek to gain their brother by application of the Word of God. This effort is to continue until it is clearly evident that the fallen brother "neglects to hear them", as the Lord says.

When such a condition prevails and the fact of the sin and the unwillingness to bow to the Word of God has been established a further effort must still be made to gain the unrepentant brother. When such is the case, Jesus says, "Tell it unto the church." We are not left in doubt by the Lord as to what is meant by the church. The church is defined for us in verse 20, where we are told, "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them." This passage defines the church as a group of Christians gathered about the Word of God in a certain place. Now the entire company of believers in the congregation seeks to bring the sinner to repentance.

If the sinning brother should remain impenitent in the face of the loving admonition of the Word, brought by the assembly of believers, he has revealed that he has changed from his former status as a believer. He is no longer a brother. To the public proclamation of this sad fact Jesus says, "Let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican."

In Paul's letters to the Corinthians we are afforded an opportunity for further instruction concerning that function of the church, which we call excommunication. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul speaks of a matter commonly reported, an offense known not only to the Corinthians, but outside the confines of the congregation and the city of Corinth. He says, "It is reported that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife." (1 Cor. 5:1). Here was a shameful public sin on the part of one of the members of the congregation, yet the man was permitted to continue his membership as though nothing had happened, this despite the fact that the Word of God was clear: "Cursed be he that lieth with his father's wife; because he uncovereth his father's skirt. And all the people shall say, Amen." (Deut. 27:20). Despite his open sin this member of the Corinthian Congregation continued to hold all the rights and privileges of membership. Paul admonishes the congregation, even pre-

pares a resolution for their adoption, urging them to deal with this public sinner. He says, "Put away from among yourselves that wicked person." (1 Cor. 5:13). This man had been deprived of the blessing of brotherly admonition. If this man continued impenitent after proper admonition by the congregation, he was to be considered outside the Holy Christian Church and in the Kingdom of Satan and hell, unless and until he repented. This is clear from the word of Paul concerning the above mentioned man, instructing the congregation to "deliver such a one unto Satan." (1 Cor. 5:5)

That the local Christian congregation has the authority to bind a sinner unto hell for manifest impentence over against the Word of God is taught by verses 19 and 20 of Matthew 18, where the Lord says, "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven."

According to Scripture, therefore, excommunication is an act whereby a Christian congregation, which is nothing else than the sum total of individual priests and kings, acting jointly as a fruit of their common faith, after dealing with a manifest sinner on the basis of the Word of God, has established that a professed believer is manifestly impentent and therefore an unbeliever. Excommunication does not in effect itself shut the door of heaven, but it is the public, outward demonstration of that which has already taken place in the soul of a man. Since the sinner has remained impenitent in defiance of the Word, this action of the congregation is binding in heaven.

It goes without saying, of course, that excommunication, if not based upon established impentence, or, if not carried out according to the Word of God, does not exclude that soul from heaven. Though Luther was placed under the ban by the Pope, he could for the above stated reason boldly and with peace of conscience show his con-

tempt for the excommunication by publicly burning the notice of his excommunication. But when the Christian congregation establishes open impentence on the basis of the Word of God and pronounces the sinner to be a heathen man and a publican, "this is as valid and certain in heaven also as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself."

Even as the Word of God clearly teaches that the impentent sinner is to be excluded from the Christian congregation, so it also teaches with equal clarity regarding termination of fellowship.

Our God is a God of truth, as the Psalmist says, "Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of truth." (Ps. 146:6). "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all." (1 John 3:15). To sinful men who "love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil" (John 3:19) God has given the light of His truth. This light is the revelation of God in His Word. This Jesus taught when He prayed in His High Priestly prayer, "Sanctify them through Thy truth: Thy Word is truth." (John 17:17).

Even as disciples are born of the truth, so disciples are also led safely by the truth to everlasting life. Therefore, in His great Commission Jesus instructs His Church concerning those who in the future would labor in His Kingdom to make disciples. "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." (Matt. 28:20). The Lord also set forth the mark of genuine discipleship when He said to those Jews that believed in Him, "If ye continue in My word, then are ye My disciples indeed." (John 8:31).

But the truth is not unopposed in this world. The devil is actively engaged in destroying truth and its blessed saving power. His chief and most effective weapon, especially in the last days, is to convince men that falsehood and truth can exist together without harm to the truth. Peter clearly foretells the presence and progress of Satan's evil work, when he writes, "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring

in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of." (2 Peter 2:1-2). As the day of the Lord approaches opposition to the truth shall increase, as Paul says, "But evil men and seducers shall wax worse, deceiving and being deceived", making necessary an increased effort to "continue in the things we have learned and have been assured of." (2 Timothy 3:13-14). And as that day draws ever nearer false prophets who subvert the truth will find an ever increasing number of eager hearers; for the Scripture says, "The time will come when they (the hearers) will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap up unto themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned to fables." (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

Because of the precious truth of the Word, which alone "is able to make men wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15), children of God are to "prove all things" and "to hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21); to "abhor that which is evil" and to "cleave to that which is good." (Romans 12:9). They are admonished to "hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering" (Hebrews 10:23) and to "earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints." (Jude 3).

A two-fold assault upon the truth is to be expected: from those without the fellowship of the faith, who seek to gain recognition for their false teachings through the hand of fellowship, which, when once accomplished, would mean that their objective has been achieved, and, secondly, from those within the fellowship of faith, who turn away from the truth and bring forth the false, while claiming that they still hold to the truth.

Jesus warns against such as are without the fellowship of the truth when He says, "Beware of false prophets who come to you." (Matt. 7:15). Their entrance into the fold of the truth is to be vigilantly guarded

against and strenuously resisted; for, though they come in "sheep's clothing", as lovers and proponents of the truth, in reality they are "ravening wolves". Concerning such who "cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine we have learned" (Romans 16:17), and who "by good words and fair speeches would deceive the hearts of the simple" (Romans 16:18), God's Word says, "Avoid them." Speaking of such as come from without into the household of faith, bringing another doctrine, yet demanding acceptance and recognition, the Lord says, "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God-speed; for he that biddeth him God-speed is partaker of his evil deeds." (2 John 10-11). Termination of fellowship is not the question with those from without the fellowship of the truth. God forbids the beginning of fellowship with all such until they renounce error and embrace the truth.

Perhaps the most difficult and trying assault for the children of God come from those within the fellowship of faith, who, forsaking the solid foundation of the truth, embrace and promote the error they once abhorred. That there will be such is plainly stated by Peter when he says, "There shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies." (2 Peter 2:1). Such are not to be ignored as though they were but wayward, harmless children. Nor are they to be long harbored within the fellowship of faith. Our Lord says of them, as of those false prophets who come from without, in simple clear words, "Mark them which cause divisions and offences (literally, death traps); and avoid them." (Romans 16:17). The moment that we mark anyone to be a causer of divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine we have learned, they are to be avoided. At this point, in contradistinction to excommunication, no lengthy process is to be instituted to discover the cause for this tragedy. As soon as we have marked a brother as a causer of divisions and offences, he is to be avoided.

But what does it mean to avoid? Light is shed on its meaning by other clear pass-

ages of Scripture. In 2 Corinthians 6:17 we read, "Therefore come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord". In 2 Thessalonians 3:6 we are told, "Withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly" and in verse 14, "If any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man and have no company with him." In Titus 3:10 we read, "An heretic after the first and second admonition reject."

Thus the Scripture teaches concerning termination of fellowship.

II.

THE RELATION BETWEEN EXCOMMUNICATION AND TERMINATION OF FELLOWSHIP

The very terms that we are considering suggest a close relationship between excommunication and termination of fellowship. The terms "communion" and "fellowship" are found in the King James Translation of the Bible. Both are translations of the same Greek noun 'koinonia'. For example, the word 'koinonia' is translated 'fellowship' in Acts 2:42, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine and fellowship." In Corinthians 6:14 it is translated 'communion', "What communion hath light with darkness."

The use of these related terms will be understood, if we note the similarity of purpose on God's part in both excommunication and termination of fellowship. Both excommunication and termination of fellowship are acts of love and mercy on God's part, designed to rescue and save sinners.

In urging the excommunication of the fornicator in Corinth, Paul clearly states God's purpose in this act when he says, "To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." (1 Corinthians 5:5). When impenitence has been established by the Christian congregation, God requires that the congregation declare such an one a heathen man and a publican in the hope that this grave action may lead him to repentance that his soul

To avoid therefore means to separate from, to withdraw from, to have no company with, and to reject. In short, when anyone with whom we formerly had fellowship on the basis of the same doctrines of the Word of God, becomes a causer of divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine we have learned, all fellowship must cease.

may be saved.

In Thessalonica there arose some who walked disorderly and not after the tradition received from the apostles. (1 Thess. 3:5). They stopped working at their earthly calling because they believed that Christ's second coming was imminent. Concerning such Paul wrote, "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed." (2 Thessalonians 3:14). God's purpose in requiring termination of fellowship with those who obey not the Word is also a gracious one, designed to bring the disobedient one to repentance.

Furthermore, both excommunication and termination of fellowship are required by God to shield and protect the children of truth

By not acting against the fornicator in Corinth the congregation at Corinth not only failed the sinning one, but placed themselves in danger. In urging excommunication through Paul, God admonishes and warns, "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven." (1 Cor. 5:6-7). Unless sinners are admonished according to God's Word and, when they show themselves to be manifestly impenitent, are excluded from the Christian congregation, others will be encouraged to boldness in sin and sin will spread and flourish. Thus by

excommunication God lovingly provides for the protection of His own.

The same is true also in termination of fellowship. After Paul left Galatia false teachers entered the congregation. There they were permitted to promote and propagate their error. In urging the congregation to disassociate themselves from the false teachers, Paul warned against a delay, when he said, "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." (Galatians 5:9).

Similar warning is given in 2 Timothy, "but man profane and vain babblings; for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word doth eat as a canker (gangrene)." (2 Timothy 2:16 - 17). Jesus Himself had given similar warning, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." (Matthew 7:15). The danger to souls inherent in false prophets is most clearly spelled out in Romans, where we are told that those who cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine we have learned will "by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple." (Romans 16:18). By requiring termination of fellowship with errorists God in His love would preserve us from the virile and deadly infection of false doctrine.

Nevertheless, while there is a close relationship between excommunication and termination of fellowship there is also a distinct difference between them.

Excommunication requires a careful examination which goes beyond the outward act. It requires an investigation of the basic motives which prompted the sin. Excommunication, if properly carried out, will generally require long and prayerful consideration; for no Christian congregation will be hasty in declaring a man an unbeliever unless impentence has been clearly established.

Termination of fellowship does not require the same degree of consideration; for it deals only with the outward act itself.

Termination of fellowship is not the immediate result of the turning aside by a brother in the faith unto error. Rather, "Termination of fellowship is called for

when Scriptural correction has been offered and rejected and the erring brother or church body have continued in their error despite admonition". (A Call to Decision - Wisconsin Synod Proceedings of 1959, p. 209 - 212). This, however, does not require the kind of investigation that is required for excommunication. The Lord Himself also indicates that termination of fellowship is not contingent upon a lengthy investigation when He says, "A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject." (Titus 3:10). There is to be no lengthy investigation as to motives. Whether his false doctrine is the result of stubborn unbelief or the result of weakness, is not to be our concern. When a fallen brother has been admonished and he continues in his error despite admonition, he becomes a causer of divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine we have learned. Fellowship with that man is to cease.

Luther recognized the difference involved when dealing with a matter of doctrine and when dealing with a matter of the Christian life. In speaking on the mercy and long suffering mentioned in Colossians 3:12, he says, "But this tender mercy is to be exercised only toward Christians and among Christians, for toward those who reject and persecute the Gospel we must act differently; here I am not to let my love be merciful so as to tolerate and endure false doctrine. When faith and doctrine are concerned and endangered, neither love nor patience are in order. Then it is my duty to contend in earnest and not to yield a hairbreadth. Otherwise when people let the faith stand and confess it, even though their lives are imperfect, I must forever go on being cordial and merciful to them, not punish, oppress or hound them, but invite, beseech, implore, bear and endure them. For a defective life does not destroy Christendom, but exercises it. However, defective doctrine and false faith ruin everything. Therefore, when these are concerned, neither toleration nor mercy are in order but only anger, dispute and destruction - to be sure, only with the Word of God as our weapon." (What Luther Says, Vol. II, p. 637, 1958). Again Luther says, "For this reason, as I often advise, doctrine must be carefully

distinguished from life. Doctrine is heaven; life is earth. In life are sin, error, impurity, and misery - with vinegar, as men are wont to say. There love should close an eye, should tolerate, be deceived, believe, hope, and bear everything; there the forgiveness of sins should mean most, if only sin and error are not defended. But in doctrine there is no error, and hence no need for any forgiveness of sins. Therefore, there is no similarity at all between doctrine and life. One little point of doctrine is worth more than heaven and earth. This is why we cannot bear to have it violated in the least. But to errors of life we can close an eye almost to the point of blindness. For we too daily err in life and morals, as all saints do; and these imperfections they confess earnestly in the Lord's Prayer and in the Creed. But by the grace of

God our doctrine is pure. All our articles of faith are sound and are grounded in Holy Writ. The devil would gladly contaminate and overturn these. Therefore he so cunningly attacks us with the specious argument that the love and harmony of the churches are not to be violated." (What Luther says, Vol. I, p. 415, 1224).

While both excommunication and termination of fellowship are similar in that both are acts of God, designed to rescue erring soul and to protect simple children of the truth from spiritual harm, yet both are separate and distinct acts. Excommunication requires the establishment of impenitence; Termination of fellowship requires only the establishing of the fact of continuance in error, without regard to the cause or motive underlying the action.

III.

THE APPLICATION OF EXCOMMUNICATION AND TERMINATION OF FELLOWSHIP

The application of excommunication is restricted to an individual. Jesus says, "If thy brother trespass against thee," and again, "Let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican." (Matthew 18:15-17). Paul speaks about "one" in Corinth who had his father's wife and instructs the congregation "to deliver such an one unto Satan" and to "put away from among yourselves that wicked person." (1 Corinthians 1:5-13) The very nature of excommunication is such that it cannot be applied to groups; for excommunication requires the establishment of the personal impenitence of an individual.

Termination of fellowship, on the other-hand can be applied either to an individual or to a group of individuals.

That it can be applied to an individual is not only self-evident, but clearly stated, "A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject." (Titus 3:10)

However, unlike excommunication, termina-

tion of fellowship can be applied to more than one, that is to a group of individuals. This Jesus indicates when He says, "Beware of false prophets." (Matthew 7:15). Though false prophets may or may not hold the same doctrine, or may vary greatly in the extent of their false doctrines, yet they all come under the common condemnation of false prophets as though they were one. Since this is true, termination of fellowship may be exercised over against more than one, that is, over against a group. This is taught in Romans 16:17, where we are told, "Mark them ... Avoid them." If men uphold false doctrine collectively as a group, termination of fellowship not only can be, but must be applied to the entire group, aligned under a false confession. Nor can it be argued that termination of fellowship ought to be withheld because there still are those within the group who do not approve the false doctrine and are even vigorously contending against it. If the body, once sound in doctrine, has become guilty of causing divisions and offences contrary

to the doctrine we have learned, termination of fellowship with that body is required. Though formerly there was a God-pleasing fellowship between such as were "perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" concerning the Word of God, since they now no longer "speak the same thing" fellowship with that group is to be terminated. (1 Cor. 1:10)

But who may apply excommunication and termination of fellowship?

It goes without saying that the Christian congregation can both excommunicate and terminate fellowship for all things, including the use of the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, have been given to the assembly of believers. Paul writes to the Corinthian congregation, "For all things are yours ... And ye are Christ's and Christ is God's." (1 Corinthians 3: 21 - 23). In Matthew 18, having said, "Tell it unto the church", Jesus says, "Verily I say unto you, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." There is no spiritual power which the local Christian assembly does not possess in all its fulness.

Most generally the Christian congregation will exercise discipline in its own midst according to Matthew 18. However, when the need arises the congregation will also exercise termination of fellowship among its own members. Let us suppose that it becomes known that a member has embraced a false doctrine. He has made no public propaganda for his error. Church discipline will be instituted according to the Lord's direction in Matthew 18. Brotherly instruction and admonition will first be privately brought to him. If, however, in the meantime he becomes a public promoter, expounder and defender of his false doctrine the passages referring to termination of fellowship will apply rather than Matthew 18. The situation has changed. Now it is no longer a question of determining whether he holds this false doctrine because of wilful unbelief. If in spite of his instruction he continues in his error and propagates it, fellowship with that man is

to be terminated. Thus the flock will be delivered from the dangers and ravages of false doctrine.

This has become more than an academic question with some during the past years. When the question arose in congregations concerning the leaving of unfaithful church bodies in obedience to the Word of God, there were always (to the best of my knowledge) those who opposed. When the Lord granted the majority in a congregation the grace to remain obedient and true to the Word and to establish a clear confession by its decision, the question arose about the status of those who yet opposed the truth and defended error. It is my contention that, after sufficient time has been given for those who were misled by beguiling men to repent of their ways, action by the congregation should be instituted on the basis of Romans 16:17 instead of Matthew 18; for they had demonstrated themselves to be causers of divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine. God's Word demanded that their voices be stilled within the congregation as speedily as possible, in order to uphold the glory of the Name of God and to protect simple souls from being deceived by their good words and fair speeches.

The Christian congregation cannot excommunicate those outside its midst, but it can and must terminate fellowship with all who are errorists. That this is a painful and difficult task, particularly when it involves associations of long standing, we know from personal experience. Blessed are those congregations which recognized the duty imposed upon them and terminated fellowship with the disobedient to the Word, though in many cases the personal cost was high and the abuse from former brethren at times violent and shameful. Thus these congregations proved themselves faithful repositories of the Word of grace, a blessing to themselves and others.

The question of the application of excommunication and termination of fellowship by a group of congregations, joined together in a larger organization, commonly referred to among us as 'synods', still

remains.

This question is directly related to the rights and powers of synods. The "Theses on the Relation of Synod and Local Congregations to the Holy Christian Church", adopted by the Church of the Lutheran Confession, correctly states in Theses 3, "When it is said that a synod is 'Church' it is said with reference to its inner nature and essence, namely, in-so-far as it constitutes a communion of true believers. When it is said that a synod or conference is 'human arrangement', this is properly said with reference to its outward organizational form which is determined and defined by the congregations that have constituted this body." While a synod is 'Church' according to its nature and essence, as an organization it does not inherently possess the right to exercise all the powers of the local Christian assembly, but its powers are limited by definition of the constituting congregations. The only powers a synod may exercise are those given it by the local congregations. This truth is emphasized by Theses 4 of the above mentioned document, which states, "When a synod goes beyond the functions that have been assigned to it by the constituting congregations it oversteps its call and becomes a busy-body in other men's matters."

A synod, therefore, is the servant of God, called into being by the local congregations to perform certain specific functions. While a synod is 'Church', it does not as an organization possess the right to perform spiritual functions not assigned to it either directly or by implication.

In describing the function of a synod the most generally accepted definition among us in the past was that Synod is an advisory body in its relation to the local congregation. In line with that which was stated above I would, in the interest of accuracy of description, prefer to say that a synod is the servant of the local congregations that called it into being. In this regard, I believe, that our Church Councils are essentially the same as synods. The functioning congregation Church Council is 'Church' according to its inner essence

and nature, yet it is called into being by the will of the congregation, exercising its Christian liberty, to be its servant in carrying out certain prescribed functions, which have been specifically delegated and entrusted to it by the congregation.

A synod therefore may exercise such powers as are given it by the constitution of the constituting congregations. In article II on the purpose of our organization our constitution states, "This church body is organized and dedicated to serve the following Scriptural purposes: ... D. To protect this fellowship against the encroachment of error and unionism through united testimony and doctrinal discipline." The passages of Scripture upon which this purpose is based and on the basis of which this purpose is to be carried out are all passages referring to termination of fellowship, namely, 2 Timothy 4:2 - 3a; 2 Thessalonians 3:6; Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10; and 2 Corinthians 6:14 - 18. Our constitution in Article VIII on Supervision further states who is to be responsible for carrying out Article II D: "When it has been ascertained that members of this body are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine we have learned, the president in conjunction with the Vice-president, shall be held to declare a suspension of fellowship with the offenders." I believe the term 'suspension of fellowship' as used above is in order, since termination of fellowship would have to await ratification by the body itself at its next convention.

Our organization, therefore, has been given the power by the constituting congregations to terminate fellowship, but in no case could the body excommunicate under its present constitution. Nor is it ever conceivable in my judgment that the power of excommunication ever could or should be given to a synod, since the very nature of excommunication is such that it should always remain the function solely of the local communion of believers.

The Scriptural teaching concerning excommunication and termination of fellowship are clear. Their application is

often difficult by reason of the weakness of our flesh. Let us not, however, yield ought of the doctrine because of any weakness on our part. Rather let us humbly follow the Word, seeking the promised

guidance of our God, Who says through His apostle, "Consider what I say; and the Lord (will) give thee understanding in all things." (2 Timothy 2:7).

