

The Application of the Scriptural Principles of Fellowship to the Participation of Non-WELS Students in Religion-Oriented School Activities

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The column “A Lantern to our Footsteps” in a 1961 issue of *The Northwestern Lutheran* contained an article entitled “May We Pray at Table with People Not of the Wisconsin Synod?” Practical questions such as that one have been asked again and again in the twenty-two years which have elapsed since our Synod terminated its fellowship with the Missouri Synod in convention in 1961.

A year ago the Objectives, Policies Committee presented to this board an agenda item #29, Re: Fellowship question. The whereases and resolve you adopted stated:

- Whereas the BPE staff occasionally is questioned about the participation of non-WELS students in choirs, bands, devotions, etc. in WELS elementary and secondary schools; and
- Whereas the BPE staff would find it easier to answer such questions if the BPE had an established position on the matter; therefore be it
- Resolved that the BPE ask Pastor Joel Gerlach to prepare and present to the BPE a paper setting forth the application of the Scriptural principles of fellowship to the participation of non-WELS students in activities that involve sacred music, religious exercises, etc.

In the same April meeting of the board in which you adopted that resolution, you adopted a policy statement entitled, “Scriptural Principles Related to Enrollment Policies and Practical Applications of Those Principles.” I was still a member of this board when preliminary drafts of that statement were presented for study and discussion. Part II,3,h of that policy statement asks the question, “Is the Scriptural principle of church fellowship violated if a tuition student whose parents are members of a heterodox church sings with a school choir for worship services or serves in some other way as a leader in worship, e.g. in classroom devotions?”

The answer stated:

Even though Scripture does not answer this question directly, generally sound Christian judgment would say that if parents agree that the church and school, the pastors and teachers will train their child in the Scriptures, which includes permitting their children to attend the worship services, cf. question 3,d., those parents, in effect, have given the spiritual training of their children into the hands of that congregation. This point should be emphasized. In fact, it might be well if the parents are asked to tell their pastor that the child’s spiritual welfare is in the hands of your pastor and teachers and that if the child needs spiritual care, your pastor will give that care. Under those circumstances, the children can be treated in the same manner as the children of members of the congregation.

Therefore, there need be no violation of fellowship principles. A reminder is in place here. Parents and students, members and non-members should be taught the Scriptural principles of fellowship.

The fact that (1) practical questions involving the application of fellowship principles in our schools, and (2) that policy statements like the one just quoted, and (3) that papers like this one are assigned for study and discussion is a healthy sign. It is an indication that in an age in which Christendom is suffering from a world-wide epidemic caused by a wide-spread infection of pseudo-ecumenism, we are still concerned about ecumenism in the sense that our Lutheran confessions understand that term. It is a sign that by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we are still sensitive to biblical teaching concerning church fellowship, and that we want to be faithful in following the will of our Lord in this matter.

We ought to thank our God for prompting us to care enough to take time out from a busy schedule and agenda to make this study.

The Theology of Fellowship A Review

Before we attempt to apply the Scriptural principles of fellowship to a specific situation, we ought to review the theology which underlies the principles we want to apply. I say “review” because I plan to proceed on the basis of two assumptions. One is that those who have raised questions which led to this assignment are familiar with the doctrine of church fellowship as it is expressed and confessed in the WELS. The other assumption is that there is confessional agreement among us with regard to the doctrine. The questions, in other words, arise not from disagreement with the doctrine itself, but from differences with regard to the application of fellowship principles to practical situations in our schools. We do not intend to offer any apology for the doctrine itself.

God created persons for fellowship with himself and with each other. He intended us to share, to participate, in a full and perfect life, in a holy communion, with him and with each other in a flawless world. Sin destroyed that fellowship. Sin made us enemies of God instead of intimate friends and companions. Instead of sharing in divine company and activity, we rejected it. Sin also resulted in strife and animosity within the human family. God was thwarted but not defeated. Mercy prevailed. He unfolded a plan to undo sin’s divisive, destructive consequences, and to restore us to fellowship with himself and with one another in a new family, the holy Christian church, the communion (fellowship) of saints.

Biblical writers are fond of depicting the fellowship of the saints as a many-splendored thing. It is a thing of special beauty devoutly to be cherished and practiced in all our associations with fellow Christians. It is too good a thing to keep for ourselves for our own enjoyment of life. It calls for sharing, for reaching out. That’s part of the nature of Christian fellowship. God enhances the joy and satisfaction we derive from our fellowship when we show a zeal and determination to share its blessings with others, especially with those who have not experienced it.

So precious is our fellowship in Christ with the people of God that our doting Father does not want to risk the possibility of our losing it again. So he cautions and counsels us. He un.masks persons, he unveils teachings, he exposes personal conduct which injure and impair the fellowship. He issues explicit commands. Avoid such persons! Shun such teachings! Eschew such conduct!

It is in particular those specific, explicit commands to which we will have to direct our attention later in an endeavor to see if and how they apply to non-WELS students in our schools. This summary overview of the theology of fellowship needs to be followed up with a closer look at specific aspects of this teaching.

Church Fellowship

In 1959 the Synod’s Commission on Doctrinal Matters (now the CICR) issued a document it called *Church Fellowship*. That document provided the basis for the discussion of the doctrine of fellowship in the Joint Doctrinal Committees of the Synodical Conference. It is as lucid as it is Scriptural. It offers this concise definition of church fellowship. “Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.”

The commission unfolded that definition in two subparts. Part A: “How Scripture leads us to this concept of church fellowship,” Part B: “What principles Scripture teaches for the exercise of such church fellowship.”

Six subpoints under A spell out the details of the Scriptural concept. They also provide the Scriptural basis for each of the six points. In summary the six points are as follows:

1. The Holy Spirit unites us (establishes us in fellowship) with God through faith in Christ.
2. That faith in turn unites us with all other believers.
3. That faith expresses itself in spiritual activity.

4. The Holy Spirit leads us to express our faith in spiritual activity.
5. He leads us to express it jointly with fellow Christians in various groupings (fellowship activity).
6. Joint expressions of faith are classified in various ways, such as altar, pulpit, prayer fellowship, fellowship in church work, education, charity and the like.

Point six sets forth the Scriptural truth which resulted in the impasse in the discussions with the members of the Missouri Synod's Doctrinal Unity Committee. After listing the variety of joint fellowship activities in which the faith of Christians expresses itself, the statement continues: "Yet insofar as they are joint expressions of faith, they are all essentially one and the same thing, and are all properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship. Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith."

The "unit concept" view of fellowship is the point at which the LC-MS balked in the interest of divorcing prayer fellowship from altar and pulpit fellowship. It did so in part on the grounds that altar and pulpit fellowship involve the means of grace whereas prayer fellowship does not. Therefore prayer fellowship ought not to be elevated to the same plane or equated with altar and pulpit fellowship. More on that later.

The Pertinent Principles

Part B of the commission's doctrinal statement presents the principles Scripture teaches for the exercise of such church fellowship. Because this paper deals with the application of those principles to the activity of non-WELS students enrolled in our schools, we need to recall what those principles are. That part of the doctrinal statement is reproduced and included with this paper as an appendix.

For the sake of focusing our attention on the points particularly relevant to our study, we offer this summary.

1. A person's public confession, not faith in his heart, is the basis for determining whether or not we may express our faith jointly.
2. A Christian's confession involves in principle all of God's Word.
3. All Christians display weakness of faith (not fully understanding Scripture's teachings) and of life (not living up to what Scripture teaches).
4. Weakness is not a reason for not practicing church fellowship, but a reason for practicing it more vigorously.
5. Church fellowship must cease when a person persistently adheres to false teaching and practice.

The Scriptural basis from which these principles are drawn is provided in the full text of Part B.

The conclusion of the statement directs attention to two principles in particular which are to guide us in the exercise of church fellowship. One is "the great debt of love which the Lord would have us to pay to the weak brothers," the other is "His clear injunction (also flowing out of love) to avoid those who adhere to false doctrine and practice and all who make themselves partakers of their evil deeds."

The concluding sentence of the commission's statement needs to be underscored and emphasized. "Conscientious recognition of both principles will lead to evangelical practice also in facing many difficult situations that confront us, situations that properly lie in the field of casuistry."

That one sentence says in effect what needs to be said. Evangelical practice is the objective all of us strive for under the Spirit's guidance. Conscientious recognition of the two stated principles is the requisite for evangelical practice. What is called for is a spirit of discernment which enables a conscientious servant of God to distinguish between a weak brother who is an erring Christian and a persistent errorist who may or may not be a Christian. The concluding sentence also recognizes that many of the situations that confront us are difficult situations. If they weren't, this paper would not have been assigned. Then in an explanatory clause these

difficult situations are said to be “situations which properly lie in the field of casuistry.” That is worthy of note. We ought not pass over it unmindful of its implications.

Dictionaries treat casuistry as a branch of ethics. The Random House Unabridged Dictionary defines it as “the application of general ethical principles to particular cases of conscience and conduct.” Generally in the church we understand it to be a branch of theology associated with the discipline of pastoral theology. It deals with problematic or doubtful cases of conscience or questions of right and wrong. The solutions are not clear-cut. Discussions in cases of casuistry cannot be made merely by the application of a set of rules which govern all cases. Genuine cases of casuistry call for the exercise of good Christian judgment rather than simple perception. That means there are no pat answers to the kinds of casuistic questions which arise from the enrollment of non-WELS Students in WELS schools. The key to the questions lie in discernment, discernment as to whether the person we are dealing with is weak or whether he is persistent in his error. The law of love must always be the governing principle. We intend to expand on that later.

Understanding God’s Purpose

The number one whereas of the Objectives, Policies Committee’s agenda item #29 states: “Whereas the BP'E staff occasionally is questioned about the participation of non-WELS students in choirs, bands, devotions, etc. in WELS elementary and secondary schools...” Presumably the occasional questions are prompted by concerns on the part of principals and school boards about the propriety of the participation of non-WELS students in the activities specified in the whereas. The asking of the questions presupposes that such participation may involve a violation of our fellowship principles.

In formulating answers to such questions, it should be of help to bear in mind the divine purpose behind the Scriptural injunctions to “mark” and “avoid,” and “to receive him not into your house.”

In part that purpose is clear from what St. Paul says regarding the purpose for avoiding those who persist in causing divisions and offenses in the church. They are to be avoided because “by good words and fair speeches (they) deceive the hearts of the simple.” The NIV translates, “by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.” “Naive people” hardly does justice to τῶν ἀκάκων. The noun ἀκάκων is a Christian virtue, the virtue of innocence or guilelessness. Paul is concerned about the effect of χρηστολογία (smooth talk or plausible words) and εὐλογία (grandiloquence) on guileless and unsuspecting people, not on naive people. Paul’s concern reflects the Lord’s concern. The Lord has our interest at heart. He does not want anything contrary to the doctrine we have learned from Scripture to undermine our faith and thus to disrupt our fellowship with him and with our fellow Christians.

But that is not God’s only purpose. Every action God directs his people to take has its roots in love. We are directed to love our neighbor as ourselves, also when our neighbor is persistent errorist with whom we do not exercise fellowship. We avoid him, not because we have lost interest in him, but because love compels us to call his attention to the seriousness of his error.

So the Lord has our interest at heart. He also has the welfare of the errorist at heart. He has a dual purpose in directing us to mark and avoid. Underlying both purposes is God’s determination to preserve the gospel in his church in all its fullness. His commission to his church is to teach all things whatsoever he has commanded. He wants us to proclaim the whole counsel of God. He is intent that we neither add anything to nor subtract anything from what he has revealed to us. What God has to say is good news. He doesn’t want it to get garbled in transmission so that it comes out in a form that robs people of the hope and joy the gospel is intended to give.

That is his purpose in enjoining us to mark and avoid those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine we have learned from Scripture. As Prof. Carl Lawrenz says in his exposition of point B,5,b, “By bidding us to withhold fellowship from the adherents of false doctrine, the Lord is seeking to preserve his precious Word for us and others” (*Church Fellowship*, p. 31).

The Implications of God’s Purpose

Thus the refusal to enter freely into the exercise of Christian fellowship is never an end in itself. It is always a means to an end. It furthers God's purpose, a purpose he makes abundantly clear in Scripture. That fact has significance for the application of fellowship principles. In determining our relationship to a student who holds membership in it congregation not in fellowship with us, the question we ask is not merely: Does membership in a heterodox church identify him with its confession precluding the possibility of fellowship activity with him? The question is rather: Does the involvement of a non-WELS student in a religious-oriented activity conflict with the purpose behind the principle expressed in the injunction to avoid them?

If the question we face is merely a simple and direct: Can a non-WELS student be involved in fellowship activities in our school?, then we are dealing with a simple yes-no question which assumes that a decision can be made by applying a fixed and supposedly Scriptural rule. If the question we face is one that takes into consideration God's intended purpose, then the question requires that a judgment be made together with a decision based upon one's best judgment rather than on a set of prescribed rules. Questions like this enter the field of consideration: Does a non-WELS student's involvement in fellowship activity with us negate the purpose the Lord has in mind in establishing the fellowship principles he has laid down in Scripture? Does that student's singing in the choir or other such activity compromise the public doctrine of the WELS? Does it jeopardize the doctrinal integrity of the congregation and the school? Does it create confusion in the minds of our own children with respect to the fellowship principles we are trying to inculcate?

Such questions remind us that evangelical practice is often not easy. God does not treat his people like minor children under the old covenant. He regards us as responsible sons who have come into their majority (Gal 1:1-7). He has laid down two principles to direct us in the exercise of fellowship. He directs us to be diligent in paying the debt of love we owe to the weak. And he directs us to avoid those who are persistent in their adherence to teachings which contradict him. Our Church Fellowship document says; "Conscientious recognition of both principles will lead to an evangelical practice." But it doesn't say that such practice will be easy. Nor does it say that our practice will be uniform in all our churches and schools. Uniformity in every situation would require a set of rules instead of guiding principles. Apparently God is more interested in seeing his adopted sons and heirs apply his principles individually, responsibly, conscientiously, and faithfully than he is in uniformity.

Enrollment Policies

Most, if not all, of our schools have their own set enrollment policies. A survey of such policies revealed some similarities and some dissimilarities in the priority congregations have established for enrollment. Self evidently all schools put member children at the top of the priority list. Second and third in the priority rating designate children of members of sister congregations and children of unchurched parents. In some instances the unchurched children are second in priority, in some instances they are third. Again, in all schools children of members of non-Lutheran churches are last in the priority rating. But in each instance such children were included in the enrollment policy endorsed by the congregation.

This is neither the time nor the occasion to evaluate enrollment policies. We wish only to note what we found to be general practice in Lutheran schools. It is apparent that most WELS schools which have room enough to do so enroll non-WELS students, churched as well as unchurched. Policy statements generally make clear what the enrollment of a student whose parents are members of a heterodox church means in terms of the student's involvement in school activities. Presumably the enrollment of a non-WELS student means that a determination has been made that there is no obstacle to the exercise of fellowship with the enrollee. A person who makes it clear from the outset that his interest is in a private education and that he is fully committed to his heterodox confession is not ordinarily a prospect for enrollment.

So the question we are facing is not: Can there be any exercise of Christian fellowship with non-WELS students in WELS schools? The question we are addressing is rather: Can we exercise fellowship with such students to the same extent and in the variety of ways in which we exercise fellowship with WELS students?

The Practical Question

The fact that we have enrolled the student and that he is receiving Christian instruction from us implies something. Enrollment implies relationship as well as participation. Whether the enrollee is unchurched or still connected with a heterodox church, his enrollment implies that we do not regard him as a persistent errorist who rejects the instruction being given him and who makes propaganda against it. His receptivity to our gospel teaching necessitates that we regard him as a Christian, albeit, an erring one as long as he retains an outward connection with a heterodox church. We see that connection as a weakness which a fuller knowledge of Christian truth may help him overcome. "Weakness of faith is not in itself a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an inducement for practicing it vigorously to help one another in overcoming our individual weaknesses. In precept and example Scripture abounds with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak" (*Church Fellowship*. B,4).

How do we pay our full debt of love toward non-WELS students enrolled in our schools? We do it by drawing them into our circle of fellowship, through joint activities that build an attitude of mutual trust and confidence, through varieties of fellowship experiences commensurate with the level of their understanding, maturity and commitment.

Notice that I did not say degrees of fellowship experiences. The kinds of questions addressed to the BPE about kinds of participation appropriate for non-WELS students in our schools may betray a misunderstanding of our understanding of the Scriptural principles of fellowship. Such questions seem to imply that some people operate with the notion that there are degrees of fellowship activity. For example, a non-WELS student may sing in a school devotion, but not in a school choir because choir participation constitutes a higher degree or level of fellowship activity.

That understanding of the application of fellowship principles bears a resemblance to the position advocated by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and by other Lutheran Synods. The ALC, for example, operates with the principle: the greater the degree of doctrinal agreement, the greater the degree of fellowship activity is permissible. The LC-MS distinguishes between fellowship activity on the level of the means of grace, i.e. altar and pulpit fellowship, and fellowship activity not on the level of the means of grace, i.e. prayer fellowship. Hence joint prayer is permissible in situations where altar fellowship is not. The one is a higher level of fellowship than the other. Presumably exercise of fellowship on the higher level requires a greater degree of agreement than the exercise of fellowship on the lower level.

Our principles state, "We may classify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, e.g. pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in worship, fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian education, in Christian charity. Yet insofar as they are joint expressions of faith, they are all essentially one and the same thing, and are properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship. Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith."

The other application of our principles means that if a non-WELS student is enrolled in our school, we are obliged to exercise a variety of fellowship activities with him. If we exclude, him from certain varieties of fellowship activity, we do so for considerations other than an application of fellowship, principles. We will take up those considerations after taking a further look at the kinds of questions which are being addressed to the BPE.

Questions about the propriety of non-WELS students singing in the choir, etc, maybe an indication that the questioner leans in the direction of making church membership a prerequisite for full church fellowship. That betrays a misconception of what the church is as well as what the practice of fellowship is.

The determining factor in the matter of exercising church fellowship with a student is not whether he is a member of a WELS congregation, or even whether he intends to become one. The determining factor is whether this student whom the Holy Spirit has placed under our spiritual care knows and trusts Jesus as his Savior. He is an erring Christian. If his connection through his parents in a heterodox church is one sign of that weakness, we

will exercise fellowship with him vigorously. If that connection turns out to be an evidence of persistence in error, we will not exercise such fellowship. But then, neither will we reenroll him in the school.

To go back to the “participation” question again it helps to remember there are varieties of involvement in the exercise of church fellowship. We exercise prayer fellowship even with our own members before we exercise altar fellowship, and we do so for Scriptural reasons (1 Cor 11:28). We exercise our fellowship in worship and praise before we do so as waiters on tables (Ac 6:2).

The rationale for these varieties of involvement in fellowship activities lies in the levels of maturity and understanding Christians have attained and demonstrated. New confirmands may commune, but they may not vote in a congregational meeting. Sixteen year olds may serve as ushers, but not as elders.

Applying this to the question of non-WELS students’ participation in religious-oriented school activities, this means that if we have enrolled a student, we will exercise Christian fellowship with that student to the extent that his maturity and understanding permit. Whether or not a non-WELS student sings in the choir or serves on the school’s recruitment team is not essentially a doctrine-of-fellowship question. It is rather a level-of-maturity-and-understanding question. We settled the fellowship question when we enrolled him as a student. The restrictions applicable to non-WELS students are the same restrictions we employ elsewhere in church and school for the sake of decency and order (I Cor 14:40).

In determining involvement and assigning responsibility, we will employ the same criteria we ordinarily employ in determining involvement and assigning responsibility. For example, in choosing members of a spiritual growth committee or in selecting members for a high school recruitment team, we look for evidence of commitment, understanding, and maturity. Under ordinary circumstances a non-WELS student would not qualify because, by virtue of his non-membership, he is not yet demonstrating an evident degree of commitment to the truth as we confess it. He would be by-passed, not because a proper application of fellowship principles excludes him, but because he does not yet possess the qualifications necessary to meet our criteria. He would be by-passed for the same reasons other students who are WELS members be by-passed.

In sum, whether or not to cast non-WELS students in leadership roles involves a question of good judgment rather than a question of the proper application of fellowship principles. As an appropriate conclusion to this presentation we wish to cite Prof. Armin Schuetze’s conclusion to the article we referred to in the opening paragraph.

We see then that Scripture does not give an absolute yes or an absolute no as the answer to our question. And it does not set up a detailed set of rules that tells you exactly what you must do under every circumstance. But it does give the principles that are to guide you; it does say that you are to take note of the confession of those who come to you and want to be acknowledged as fellow Christians. If that confession shows them to be persistent errorists, you are to avoid joint expressions of faith with them. If that confession shows them to be brethren, in some cases, still weak brethren (and in private relations a personal confession may reveal him to be that in spite of doubtful church connections), you may engage in joint expressions of faith for your mutual encouragement.

The BPE would be ill-advised to try to draft a set of guidelines for principals to follow in applying principles of church fellowship to specific situations. Rather urge a study of the Scriptures as the source of our life, vigor and evangelical practice, a study whereby the principles the Lord of the church sets forth become our very own by conviction derived from our own grappling with and immersion in the Word. Then also urge us to pray for the Spirit’s help to apply the law of Christ’s love in any and every situation that arises.

In that way we will avoid an oppressive, stifling, deadening legalism. And our students will learn something from us, not only about Christian fellowship, but also about Christian freedom in the gospel. And then we may properly and proudly call the education we provide Christian education.

An appropriate word of Scripture to put all things considered into a proper concluding focus is Jeremiah 31:33-34.

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”