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Applications of the Principles of Church Fellowship

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# Applications of the Principles of Church Fellowship

## THE BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES OF CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

In this presentation I am assuming that those of us assembled here know and accept the scriptural principles of church fellowship as confessed and practiced by the Wisconsin Synod. I will not, therefore, attempt to demonstrate the scriptural basis of these principles. I will, however, briefly summarize them as an introduction to our topic, which is the *application* of those principles.

"Christian fellowship" can, of course, refer to that spiritual fellowship which we have with God through faith in Christ and to the spiritual fellowship which we have with all the members of the invisible church, that is all believers in Christ. We cherish these fellowships as a great blessing.

But here when we speak about "church fellowship," we are referring to outward activities in which Christians join together as members of the visible church. "Church fellowship" can be defined as "every expression of faith in which Christians join together because their respective confessions have led them to recognize that they are agreed in the doctrines of Scripture." Fellowship is any activity which expresses a shared faith.

Since we cannot see the faith in people's hearts, outward fellowship must be established on the basis of the individuals' outward confession. If individuals or groups agree on the doctrines of Scripture, they should practice church fellowship together. If they are not in agreement in doctrine, they should not practice church fellowship with each other.

### The Unit Concept

The biblical concept of church fellowship as taught in the Wisconsin Synod has sometimes been called the "unit concept" of church fellowship. This is an appropriate name, since church fellowship must be dealt with as a unit in two different respects.

First, when the doctrines of Scripture are being discussed to determine if two groups may practice fellowship, all doctrine must be dealt with as a unit. Since all the teachings of Scripture have the same divine authority, and we have no right to add anything to them nor to subtract anything from them, the practice of church fellowship must be based on agreement in *all* of the doctrines of Scripture.

Secondly, the various activities which may express church fellowship must be dealt with as a unit. Since various ways of expressing church fellowship (such as joint mission work, celebration of the Lord's Supper, exchange of pulpits, transfers of membership and joint prayer) are merely different ways of expressing the same fellowship of faith, all expressions of church fellowship require the same degree of doctrinal agreement, namely, agreement in all of the doctrines of Scripture.

Part 1, Section 1  
Applications of the Principles of Church Fellowship

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## APPLICATIONS OF THE PRINCIPLE

The line across the paper above the preceding subtitle has a very specific purpose. It reminds us of the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between the principles set forth in Scripture and our applications of them. It is important that we not raise our applications to a level of equality with the principles themselves.

Applications may vary with circumstances. Some of our applications are simply further instances of applications already made in Scripture. In other cases we are dealing with institutions or situations which did not exist in New Testament times. Some times cases are very clear-cut. At other times consideration of two or more principles which seem to be in conflict present us with a difficult case of casuistry.

In the following discussion I have begun with more general applications which are very parallel to situations discussed in Scripture. The second part of the discussion considers more difficult cases of casuistry. This part of the discussion is not intended to provide a rule book for dealing with all similar cases in the future, but examples of how to deal with such cases. In two situations which are quite similar in many respects there may be enough different circumstances to call for a different action on our part (such as the difference of dealing with a persistent errorist or a weak brother in outwardly similar circumstances). The illustrations made here should not be applied mechanically, but evangelically.

### All Expressions Of Fellowship Are a Unit

#### *Basic Applications of the Principle*

All Lutherans agree that the joint use of the means of grace is an expression of fellowship, even though they do not agree on the level of doctrinal unity needed for such fellowship. Christians are expressing fellowship whenever they encourage one another by their church attendance and whenever they worship together (Hebrews 10:24-25, Colossians 3:16). Quite clearly, sharing the Lord's Supper is an expression of fellowship between the participants (1 Corinthians 10:17). Therefore, we are to worship and commune only with Christians with whom we are in doctrinal agreement. We do not invite pastors with whom we are not in doctrinal agreement to preach in our churches, nor do our pastors preach in heterodox churches. This applies both to regular Sunday services and to special services of every sort. Christians should not attend communion with congregations or individuals who adhere to false doctrine.

It is clear that anyone providing financial support to a teacher of religion is expressing fellowship with him or her. This is true whether this teacher is their own pastor or someone whose work is being done elsewhere. Christians who support a pastor have not entered a business relationship with him, but into a mutual sharing of blessings from God (Galatians 6:6, 1 Corinthians 9:11). The Philippians were partners in Paul's work through the financial support which they sent to him (Philippians 1:5, 4:15). On the other hand, those who support or encourage false

teachers are partners in their evil deeds (2 John 11). They are accomplices of an evil act, just as much as the individual who drives the getaway car for a bank robber or the person who hides a fleeing murderer.

Fellowship can also be expressed by *mutual recognition* of each other's ministries, by mutual consultations to resolve doctrinal questions, and by agreeing to divide mission fields (Acts 15 and Galatians 2:1-10). We, therefore, do not participate in religious studies and consultations with heterodox churches (except in efforts to eliminate the errors that separate them from us), nor do we agree to divide mission responsibilities with them.

Church fellowship is expressed by *fraternal greetings*. Such greetings may be expressed by a handshake (Galatians 2:9), by a kiss (Romans 16:16), or by the exchange of greetings which is so common in Paul's letters. Fellowship is also expressed by the "letters of recommendation" which are common in the New Testament (Romans 16:1-3, 2 Corinthians 8:16-23, 3 John 12). Present-day practices which are parallel to these biblical customs are the handshake at ordination, confirmation, or a colloquy, the exchange of fraternal greetings at church anniversaries and conventions, and letters of transfer. We, therefore, do not transfer members to heterodox churches, nor do we convey congratulations and best wishes to the conventions of such church bodies. Our representatives may attend conventions or meetings of churches with whom we are not in fellowship (such as the LC-MS) as observers, in order to obtain accurate, first-hand information about what is happening in those bodies, but they do not participate in worship, prayers, or discussions, nor do they deliver official greetings to such meetings. (Obviously there are many exchanges of greetings which are not an expression of fellowship.)

Today co-operation in *Christian charity work* is sometimes regarded as mere "co-operation in externals," but it was not so regarded in the New Testament. The Macedonians urgently pleaded with Paul for the privilege of sharing in (that is, having fellowship in) the charitable service to the saints in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:4). The goal of this charitable work was not merely to relieve human need, but to glorify God together. "This service that you perform is not only for supplying the needs of God's people, but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you proved yourself, men will praise God for your obedience which accompanies your confession of the Gospel of Christ" (2 Corinthians 9:12-13). The spiritual motivation and the fellowship which are an essential part of Christian charitable work are emphasized throughout these chapters. We, therefore, do not join with heterodox churches in charitable work or in the operation of joint charitable institutions. When the Synodical Conference was dissolved, arrangements were made for an orderly dissolution of shared charitable work. (It is, of course, possible to do charitable work outside of the framework of religious fellowship, as is done in many secular charities.)

There are times when *praying for a person* is an expression of fellowship, for example, praying for the success of his ministry (Romans 15:30-32, 2 Corinthians 1:11). There are, of course, many other circumstances when praying for a person is not an expression of fellowship, as when Christians pray for the enemies of the church or when we pray for the government.

The dispute between the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods concerning the doctrine of fellowship centered on the propriety of *praying with people* with whom we are not in doctrinal agreement, particularly with the leaders of heterodox Lutheran churches. There is little specific treatment of the subject of prayer fellowship

in the New Testament. Prayer as an expression of fellowship is simply treated as one element among many others. The early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). However, there is nothing in Scripture to suggest that prayer should be treated any differently from any other expression of fellowship. Since God-pleasing prayer always flows from faith, every prayer is either an expression of faith (and therefore an act of worship), or it is an abomination. There is no middle ground. If true prayer is always an act of worship, joint prayer calls for the same unity of doctrine as any other act of worship. In some regards the issue of joint prayer is similar to the issue of infant baptism. Just as the command "Baptize all nations" includes children unless valid scriptural reasons can be cited for excluding them, the commands to "keep away" from false teachers and to "have nothing to do with them" certainly prohibit all expressions of fellowship with them, including prayer, unless there is an express scriptural basis for making exceptions. "Have nothing to do with them" and "keep away from them" can hardly mean "pray with them." We therefore do not pray with Christians with whom we are not in doctrinal agreement.

## *Dealing With Special Problems and Hard Cases*

### Remember the Purpose For the Principles Of Church Fellowship

When we find ourselves struggling with a difficult decision concerning the application of the principles of church fellowship, it is often helpful to remind ourselves of the purpose of the principles of church fellowship. The principles are not ends in themselves. God gave them for the good of people's souls. When you are wrestling with a hard case which does not seem to be covered by a clear rule or example in Scripture, try to evaluate each option you have on the basis of whether it will tend to enhance or work against one of the basic purposes which lie behind the scriptural injunctions against practicing fellowship with adherents of false doctrine:

- 1) Love leads us to warn the errorist against his errors in the hope that he can be won to repentance (Titus 3:10, Matthew 18:15, 2 Timothy 2:25-26, 1 Timothy 1:3-5).
- 2) Love leads us to warn others against the errorist, so that they do not fall victim to his false teaching (1 Timothy 4:1-6, 2 Timothy 4:2-5, Titus 1:10-14). We have a special concern for those weak in the faith (Jude 1:22-23).
- 3) We seek to avoid even the appearance of going along with error, also in matters which are adiaphora (Galatians 2:3).
- 4) We separate from errorists to protect ourselves from the dangerous poison of error which is a threat to our souls (2 Timothy 2:17, Galatians 5:9).

In hard cases we should ask ourselves, "How can I best give a clear testimony against error to the false teacher, to his adherents, and to everyone who observes my action?"

### Some Specific Problem Areas

#### The Lord's Supper

Normally we commune only those who are members of our fellowship. Emergency situations may arise that call for an exception to the rule. For example, suppose a WELS member's mother who belonged to the Missouri Synod was visiting her daughter and became critically ill. She became hospitalized and had no LCMS pastor to commune her. The WELS pastor who visited her in the hospital at her daughter's request could commune her since her spiritual needs would be the paramount concern. Naturally, the normal requirements for being "worthy and well-prepared" for the Lord's Supper would apply.

To explain our actions in such a case we might paraphrase Jesus' comment in Mark 2:27, which was based on a "hard case" which called for an exception to the general rules. In the Old Testament situation which provided the background for Jesus' comments the rule was clear: lay-people were not allowed to eat the show-bread from the tabernacle. Yet Jesus did not condemn the priests or David for their actions in this emergency situation which led David and his men to eat the showbread. Furthermore, Jesus directly states that even the law against work on

the Sabbath permitted exceptions. The Pharisees mistake was in forgetting that "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." We shouldn't forget that "fellowship principles were made for man, man wasn't made for fellowship principles." If we remember that "God wants mercy and not sacrifice," we won't condemn the innocent (Matthew 12:7).

Cases in which a person, for convenience sake, wants to attend Communion both in one of our congregations and in an ELCA or LC-MS congregation, such as when Midwesterners spend the winter in the Sun Belt or when students are away at school, are not emergency situations. In such circumstances we owe them a clear testimony that they cannot keep one foot in each camp.

### Funerals

Exceptional circumstances may arise in connection with funerals. Our normal practice is that WELS pastors conduct a Christian funeral only for people with whom we are in fellowship, since the funeral includes a recognition of the deceased's Christian life. It may, however, happen that a WELS pastor was ministering to a non-member during his or her last illness. In response to the pastor's presentation of the gospel that person made a confession of faith in Christ. After the person's death the pastor learns the deceased was a member of the Masonic Lodge. Normally our churches would not conduct a Christian funeral for such a person since the religious beliefs and practices of the Masonic Lodge contradict the Bible. But in this case, the deceased had not had a chance to "set his house in order." On the basis of the person's confession the pastor who had served him could conduct the funeral, but to avoid confusion or offense he would explain the circumstances to his council and/or congregation and would not allow the Masons to have any role in the Christian funeral.

### Participation Of Non-members In Our Services

If it is unionistic for us to participate in the services of heterodox churches, why do we allow members of heterodox churches or even unbelievers to participate in the hymns and prayers during our services?

It is wrong to participate in prayers, hymns, or the creed in a worship setting which supports error or grants equal rights to truth and error, such as the services of a heterodox church or an ecumenical service. Our services, however, are not such a compromised setting, since no rights or recognition are being given to error. Visitors of another faith who are present are not providing their own input to the service; they are receiving our doctrine. It is our service, not a joint service. Visitors are not being given the impression that there are no doctrinal differences which separate them from us. The fact that they cannot attend Communion in our churches gives them a clear testimony that they are not in fellowship with our congregation.

We admittedly do have a more strict practice concerning participation in the Lord's Supper than we do for joining in the hymns of the congregation. Part of the reason for this relates to fellowship concerns: coming forward to the Lord's Supper is a very public, personal confession of fellowship with the other communicants. This is one reason we treat the Lord's Supper with special care. There is, however, also an additional reason for closed communion beyond fellowship concerns, that is, our responsibility to be sure that communicants are properly instructed and prepared so that they do not partake of the Sacrament unworthily. We cannot

readily assume such preparation on the part of people who are not of our fellowship.

Even in the early church, non-members were not excluded from the service, but only from the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Our practice basically has been: We do object to our members joining in the services of the heterodox because this appears to give assent to false teaching; we do not have the same objection to prospects or visitors appearing to give assent to our services, which do not promote false doctrine.

If visitors do choose to participate in hymns or other elements of the service, their participation may imply an acceptance of what is being taught. So visitors of another faith who recognize this can, and often do, refrain from participating in the service when they are present in our services to witness an event such as a baptism.

Choir Members, Organists,  
Choir Directors, Soloists, Etc.

All of these activities seem to fit into a category between the Lord's Supper and the singing of hymns during the service. They do not require proper spiritual preparation in the same way as the Lord's Supper does, but they are a more-visible, public testimony of fellowship than sitting in the pew and joining in the hymns is. We often urge members to join the choir as a way of expressing their faith and serving the Lord. We have long included musical training in the education of our Lutheran elementary school teachers, because we want our church musicians to be committed ministers of music, who are able to make more than a mechanical contribution to the worship of the church. Church musicians are public representatives of the church with a prominent public role. They, therefore, should be members of the congregation or its fellowship.

A secondary, practical consideration is the effect our practice may have on wavering or indecisive prospects. If we allow people who are not ready to make a commitment to membership to participate in the ministries of the congregation as if they were members, we may be encouraging them to continue their procrastination. Withholding privileges of membership from them will make it clear to them that they cannot continue to straddle the fence, but must make a decision. To permit them to make a commitment to serve the church before they are even committed to joining it is to put the cart before the horse. There might, however, be circumstances in which a committed person could be permitted to join the congregation or to serve it in special ways before completing all of the lessons of a membership class. Such cases would be dealt with on an individual basis.

In real life, however, disputes which arise concerning the participation of non-members in our services are rarely due to the presence of such sincere seekers, who are coming to the congregation to receive instruction in the truth. Problems are much more often due to one of two causes. One, the congregation has concluded that it does not have adequate, willing musicians among its members and must seek elsewhere for competent organists and directors. It may hire such musicians with the rationale that they are just mechanics pushing the keys and collecting their pay. If all parties share this understanding of the job, perhaps it can be argued that this practice is no different than hiring a janitor, but is it really true that enhancing worship is as mechanical a function as sweeping the church floor? In such cases, it would be wise for the congregation to stop and ask itself, "Are



we reaching outside our fellowship for musicians to fill our musical needs or our musical wants? Will our services serve as a better testimony of our faith if we gladly serve the Lord with the best talents he has given us or if we hire the best talents available, even if it means going outside our faith?" If the Lord has not given us anyone who can sing or direct, maybe it is not yet time for us to have a choir. (The rapid development of high quality computerized music will soon diminish the need to look to outside sources for musicianship).

The second major source of conflict is the desire of members to have non-members participate in wedding services and the like. Here again we can ask the same questions as above, "Do we want this person to participate to meet musical needs or musical wants? Will our wedding service be a better testimony to our faith if we use the talents God has provided within our fellowship of faith or if we place our desire for musical beauty ahead of our love for the truth?" If the reason for wanting to include non-members is not musical quality, but personal friendship, a second factor comes into play. Is there an unwillingness to give a clear and honest testimony to friends and relatives concerning the differences that divide us? Is it really love for them to allow them to hold the impression that the doctrinal differences which divide us are not that important?

Most of our congregations do not exclude children of non-members from singing in church on such occasions as a service following the completion of VBS. Is this discrepancy from the policy which we have discussed above justified? It is normally clear to everyone that the children in the VBS are simply presenting what they have been taught in class. They are not independent preachers, who adhere to a message different from that of the congregation. They are learners receiving instruction from the congregation. If a situation arose in which Baptist parents said, "We think it's great that our children can come to your VBS each summer and sing in your service even though we disagree with your doctrine of baptism," I would not let their children participate, since I would have to give a clear testimony against their error. The aim of the principles of church fellowship is not to prevent people from hearing, accepting, and proclaiming the truth, but to give a clear testimony against false teaching. If we remember that we will generally have a good idea of the action we should take in a given case.

Similar questions arise about the activities of non-member students in our elementary schools, high schools, and colleges. Should these students participate in chapel services, choral presentations, and the like? Here the root of the problem often lies in unclarity concerning the enrollment policy. Are the non-members in our schools evangelism prospects, willing learners who are being instructed with the hope of winning them for our fellowship? If so, they can participate in the school in the same ways as they would in congregational life, as discussed above. But if this is really their intention and ours, we should carefully examine our attitude toward their tuition payments. It seems inappropriate to charge evangelism prospects a higher tuition than members for the privilege of being instructed in the gospel. Do we charge non-members a surcharge for attending our services?

If, on the other hand, these students and their parents are Christians who hold doctrinal convictions which are not in agreement with our position, who intend to maintain their present fellowship, but who are willing to pay for the services of our school for the perceived educational benefits, we should not treat them as if they were in fellowship with us, for then we are sending confusing, mixed signals. We should also honestly ask why we permit their enrollment in our school

under such circumstances. Are we trying to win them away from their heterodox church, or are we providing them with educational services for a fee as a way to increase the income of our school? Or are we simply hoping to avoid the whole issue?

We should treat such students in the same way that we treat visitors to a congregation. If they are prospects or "weak brothers" being instructed in the truth, they can participate in the regular instructional program and worship, but they should not take a leading role in worship or serve as public representatives of the school, as, for example, touring choirs do. Since our main concern in the practice of church fellowship is clear public testimony, there is some difference between in-house chapel services on one the hand and public concerts or tours to congregations on the other, but even in-house events should give a clear testimony to all students and parents, members and non-members alike.

This principle is illustrated by our seminary's general policy. In very exceptional cases a student might be admitted who was coming to us for confessional reasons, but who had not yet joined a WELS congregation. But he could not represent the seminary or the church in public, even in such roles as practice teaching, until he had taken a clear confessional position by means of his church membership. Even in such cases of transfer for confessional reasons it is normal that the question of the student's membership and confessional stand are resolved before enrollment.

#### Sponsors and Witnesses

Baptismal sponsors in the true sense of the word, that is, those who promise to help raise the child in the true teachings of the Bible, must be members of our fellowship. Those who merely witness that the baptism was performed need not be of our fellowship, but we should instruct prospective parents of the value and importance of choosing sponsors who qualify to be a positive Christian influence on the child, especially if it should lose its parents. The new baptismal order which emphasizes the role of the congregation and the parents and deemphasizes the role of sponsors will reduce problems with this issue.

No confessional role is involved in being witnesses to a wedding, so the principles of fellowship do not come into play.

#### Receiving Funds From Outside The Church

The church sometimes receives funds from outside its membership. These may be offerings given by visitors or they may be gifts or grants offered by foundations or corporations. In some cases the gifts are offered spontaneously by the giver. In other cases the church may seek these grants or make formal application for gifts which have been offered. How does the reception of such gifts relate to the principles of church fellowship?

First, concerning gifts from individuals. We need not reject offerings made by visitors, but we should be very careful that non-members are not receiving a faulty impression concerning the motivation for Christian giving. If there is a self-righteous motive for the gift, we must warn the person against such giving and may have to reject the gift to make the point clearly. For example, if an excommunicated person offered a large gift to the congregation which had disciplined him in order to express his attitude, "I am not good enough for you,

but I bet my money is," the congregation should reject the gift to make it clear "what we want is not your possessions, but you" (2 Corinthians 12:14). If it is not clear what their motivation for such gifts is, the solution is simple--ask them. We cannot let desire to receive a gift stand in the way of a clear testimony to the giver.

If foundations or corporations are involved, the situation often becomes more murky. It is most clear-cut when corporations simply offer to match charitable contributions of their employees or customers. This is a fringe benefit offered to the employee or customer. The employee or member assume personal responsibility for where the gift goes and for the use which is made of it. I have an investment in a fund which will match, up to a certain limit, a gift I make to one of our schools. These gifts are part of the return on my investment, an incentive to me to hold that investment. Neither I nor the school have any fellowship with the company.

But what if the corporation takes it upon itself to determine where the grants go and how they are used? They certainly must accept a measure of responsibility for the use which is made of those funds. Further problems arise if the group promotes itself as a religious association which is joining in the work of the church. Are the gifts advertized as a spiritual service offered by the corporation and its members? Such practices raise concerns about the propriety of receiving funds from corporations or foundations.

In our circles most of the concern and controversy about this issue has involved grants received from two Lutheran insurance companies, the AAL and Lutheran Brotherhood.

There was little problem before 1961 when the AAL served only members of the Synodical Conference, and the Lutheran Brotherhood served members of other Lutheran churches. After the dissolution of the Synodical Conference, however, the AAL decided to serve Lutherans from all Lutheran bodies. This raised problems since the AAL bylaws implied fellowship between its members. In 1973, as a result of this unclarity, the WELS Conference of Presidents declared a moratorium on applying for grants from the AAL. Subsequently the AAL changed its bylaws to remove the implications of fellowship. The moratorium was then lifted. In 1979, the WELS convention accepted a lengthy report on this issue (*Proceedings*, p 49-65.). The report concluded that receiving grants from such corporations does not in itself imply fellowship with the corporations nor with the other organizations which receive grants from them. However, the report also warned that vigilance is necessary lest such grants undermine Christian stewardship or give the impression that unity and fellowship exist where they, in fact, do not. The report also expressed concern that AAL advertizing sometimes gave the impression of fellowship, contrary to the explicit statements of the bylaws.

The 1979 report also concluded that the Lutheran Brotherhood's statement of purpose implied a spiritual fellowship between its members and that the WELS, therefore, should not seek grants from the Lutheran Brotherhood. The Lutheran Brotherhood statements were later changed, and WELS institutions have received grants from them since then.

#### Attending Services Of Heterodox Churches

We should worship only with those with whom we are in agreement in doctrine.

A person may be present at services of heterodox churches for reasons other than worship, for example, to attend the wedding or funeral of a relative or friend or to observe the worship of that church body in order to obtain correct information about it. But in such cases the observer should not participate in the worship, rites, or prayers of the heterodox group.

1 Corinthians 8:10 ("If anyone with a weak conscience sees you...eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?") may simply be a rhetorical question referring to something which should never happen, but it may refer to a real situation in which a Christian was invited by friends or family to attend a festive meal in one of the rooms at a heathen temple which served a function similar to our rented banquet halls. There would not necessarily be anything wrong with such attendance, as long as it did not lead weak Christians to sin against their consciences by eating meat sacrificed to idols. But 1 Corinthians 10:14-21 states very specifically that Christians are not to participate in any meals which are rites honoring an idol.

#### Attending Schools with a Religious Affiliation

Sometimes WELS members may wish to attend schools which have some sort of religious affiliation. Does this involve them in religious fellowship with the church that sponsors the schools?

Sometimes the school may be a university or college, like Marquette, St. Olaf's, or Concordia, which has a religious affiliation, but which accepts all students into its academic programs on a "pay-for-services" basis. Many WELS members attend such colleges. We may not necessarily be happy with these choices in cases in which the students could attend one of our WELS colleges, but there is not necessarily any fellowship involved. Attendance at chapel and participation in worship would involve fellowship. Taking a religion class would not necessarily involve fellowship, but could be a danger to a person's faith, just as many classes in a secular university might be.

Sometimes in areas where there are no WELS schools and the public schools are bad, WELS parents may wish to have their children attend a Christian high school or elementary school. They sometimes feel that are faced with a choice between two evils, a public school which promotes unchristian values or a religious school which may entangle them in unscriptural fellowship. This is admittedly a very difficult situation. It may well be that neither option is God-pleasing. Maybe home schooling, a prep school, or even moving are an option.

But let us suppose that the only two options are public school or religious school. What then? We must distinguish between situations which may confront us with temptation or danger to our faith and situations which require us to sin. God may well require us to face temptation and defeat it. He does not require us to sin. Let us look at the two options.

I don't know of any public school where the required curriculum "forces humanism, evolution and anti-Christian morality (safe sex, abortion) upon the students." The curriculum may force them to be exposed to teachers and materials which advocate such views, but the students and their parents do not have to accept or practice these views. Being exposed to such views may be a danger, but it is not in itself a sin. It may, in fact, be an opportunity to testify against such

views.

In a non-Lutheran school the children may also be endangered by exposure to teaching which is unbiblical. Such subtle false doctrine may be more dangerous to faith than the more crass and obvious errors of some public schools. I assume that children attending a private religious school have waived any right to oppose or contradict the teachings of that school. If the school, as a condition of attendance, requires children to participate in worship which violates the biblical principles of fellowship, this does not merely expose the children to danger. It also requires them to sin. This a parent cannot accept or allow.

Limited to the choices described above, I would use the public school, but would carefully seek accurate information about what was being taught, speak against those classes which present unscriptural material, seek relief from them where possible, and teach my children the truth which opposes those teachings.

Difficult situations such as this are sometimes a matter of judgment. Two sets of Christian parents in very similar environments may come to different conclusions. In such situations we should be cautious about judging the decisions made by others. Doubtful cases are not a place to exercise church discipline. When confronted with such a dilemma ourselves, we should become fully informed, discuss our situation with a few trusted Christian friends, and make the best decision we can, trusting the Lord's promise, "God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. He will also provide a way out that you can stand up under it."

#### Working for Religious Institutions

Our members are sometimes employed by churches, religious schools, or institutions affiliated with a church. Many such jobs, such as janitorial or secretarial work and food service, may involve no religious fellowship. Our churches and schools often employ non-members in such positions. Civil rights laws may also come into play in some of these cases. Other jobs, such as teaching, may involve a worker in the religious ministry of the church or may require participation in worship. Such jobs would involve a compromise of fellowship principles. Other cases may be unclear, such as some teaching or coaching positions. In such cases a person should examine each situation on its own merits.

How does the employer define the job? What are the requirements of the job? We cannot necessarily assume that the requirements of the position are the same as they would be for a similar position in our church. Ambiguous situations are a matter of judgment. Two Christians in very similar circumstances may come to different conclusions. In such situations we should be cautious about judging the decisions made by others. Doubtful cases are not a wise place to exercise church discipline.

#### Public Testimony and Conferences with Heterodox Churches

We should always be ready to give clear testimony to the truth whenever we have the opportunity, even in a hostile environment. Paul was ready to testify and to defend the truth, even in heathen temples and hostile synagogues, but he never compromised the truth to gain a hearing, and he withdrew from those who refused his testimony.

Examples of situations in which we might have the same opportunity to witness to the truth are 1) "free conferences" with individual Lutherans who have a genuine interest in becoming informed about doctrinal differences between their synods and ours, 2) doctrinal discussions, outside the frame-work of fellowship, with church bodies not in fellowship with us, or 3) presentations of our beliefs to a non-Christian group.

X In a "free conference" individuals who believe that they may be agreed in doctrine or may be able to reach agreement in doctrine meet to discuss those doctrines which seem to be a point of difference separating their respective church bodies. They do not represent their church bodies. Our goals in attending such meetings with confessional Lutherans from other synods with whom we are not in fellowship is to encourage individuals in those synods to make a clear confession of the scriptural position within their church body and to separate from that church body if their testimony is not accepted. "Free conferences" aim to help like-minded confessors find each other so that they can separate themselves from unionistic fellowships and join an orthodox church.

We are also ready to meet with representatives of churches with whom we are not in fellowship, such as the LC-MS or the CLC, any time they desire to discuss the differences which separate us, as long as such meetings are progressing toward reaching a scriptural resolution of the dispute and are not seeking a compromise between truth and error. Such discussions should begin with a study of the Scripture passages which deal with the doctrines which have been the cause of the division. We would not be willing to continue meetings which were merely being used as "window dressing" to give an impression of cooperation and agreement between the church bodies.

I once had the opportunity to present the topic "Who is Jesus?" to a large group of Muslims and the subsequent opportunity to get thrown out of a mosque for talking about Christ there. No one on either side of the divide had the impression that either I or the Muslim speaker was watering down his position or seeking a compromise between the two positions. We should not hesitate to make use of such opportunities as Paul did in Acts 19:8-10.

We would not participate in worship or prayers in any of the situations described in the preceding paragraphs.

Since our two-fold goal is giving testimony to the truth and avoiding any support for error, our general principle should be to give a clear testimony to a heterodox church or a heathen religion "on their turf" any time we have the opportunity to do so, but to refrain from giving heterodox or heathen teachers an opportunity to make propaganda for their teachings among Christian people.

Sometimes the situation is not clear-cut, and one must weigh the benefits of the opportunity to witness against the possibility of causing confusion or offense. There is a certain amount of danger of offense in any situation in which you are offered an opportunity to "take turns" with heterodox teachers. At times one may be able to make a clear confession even in such circumstances. When I was a home-mission pastor, each week the local paper in our small town ran a short sermon written by one of the local pastors. For convenience the schedule for these sermons was set up by the local ministerial association. One day the editor of the paper called me in and said that she knew that because of my principles of fellowship (which she did not agree with) I did not participate in the local

ministerial association, but she felt that the community should be exposed to my views, and that she, therefore, wanted to set up a schedule for me to provide sermons for the paper. She offered to do this directly with me so that I could write for the paper without going through the ministerial association. Our church was notorious enough in town for its "intolerance and narrow-mindedness" that I didn't have much concern that anyone would think I was in cahoots with the local ministerial association so I accepted the offer.

I recently was invited by a district pastors conference of the LC-MS to appear on a program with Bishop Chilstrom of ELCA in which we would present our respective views about the critical issues confronting American Lutheranism. Certainly this situation provides both the opportunity to testify and the possibility of misunderstanding and offense. I would be very happy if this "opportunity" had never come my way, but I did not refuse the invitation outright. I wrote back to the program committee and told them that if I came, I could not participate in worship or prayer, and I provided them with an outline of what I would have to say about the doctrinal issues that separate the LC-MS from ELCA and the WELS from ELCA and the LC-MS. I offered them the opportunity to "uninvite" me.

If you find yourself in such ambiguous situations, carefully weigh the situation using these criteria: 1) What can I do to give a clear presentation of the truth to those who need to hear it? 2) How can I avoid the impression of compromise with error? Then get the advice of a few good men. Prayerfully make your decision. Explain your rationale to your congregation and colleagues if this will help prevent the giving of offense. Give your testimony. Leave the results up to God. P.S.--Don't agonize too much over whether you can prevent anyone from taking offense and criticizing you--you can't. Jesus was not deterred by the fact that both his friends and foes often disapproved of the places he chose to witness (John 4:27, Luke 7:34-35).

If you find yourself suspecting that a brother made the wrong decision in such a hard case, talk to him about it, and give him the benefit of the doubt in ambiguous cases. If you feel that he was clearly in the wrong, you have an obligation to show him this on the basis of Scripture, not your own feelings.

In situations in which we have the opportunity to testify against error, we should give a greater priority to the opportunity to warn and win those in error than to the possibility that someone somewhere might take offense. In situations which do not provide the opportunity to testify against error, such as meetings which are designed to promote sharing and exchange of information about "externals" between church bodies which are not in fellowship, I would give a greater priority to avoiding offense and even the appearance of accommodation with error. I would be doubly cautious if there was a likelihood that some people could suspect that financial grants or benefits could have a bearing on my participation. I do have a duty of love to warn those in error; I do not have a duty to socialize with them. Such casual contacts, however, may open the door to a more substantial presentation of the truth.

#### Family and Friends

The principles of Christian fellowship which govern our practice of fellowship with individuals are no different from the principles which govern our relationships with groups of Christians. We are to warn everyone who is holding false doctrine against that false doctrine. If they cling to that doctrine in

spite of our admonition, we must not practice fellowship with them. It makes no difference if they are family or friends. We cannot place family and friendship ahead of our loyalty to God and his truth (Matthew 10:32-39; 12:46-49).

The one practical difference is that when religious fellowship with family or friends involves only private actions which will not give public offense, we may consider not only the public confession which they make through their church membership, but also their private, personal confession.

It is the public confession of their church which governs our public fellowship relationships with our family or friends. If they are members of a heterodox church, we must base our public relationship with them on the public confession and practice of their church. In other words, we must not participate in the services of that church with them, except as discussed above. As a testimony of love we must warn them against the false teachings of their church by refusing to participate in its services.

In our private relationships with them, we may also consider their private, personal confession. For example, if they are dissenting members of a heterodox Lutheran church, who object to its false teaching and are fighting against it, we may treat them as one with us in faith in our private relationships with them. We will encourage them to battle for the truth, but we will also warn them that they must leave that false church if their admonition is rejected. The private confession of faith which they make to us and the public confession which they are making by their church membership are in contradiction, and they must take steps to bring them into harmony.

If they are unaware of the unscriptural beliefs or practices of their church and, thus, are not knowing adherents of false doctrine, we will urge them to become accurately informed about the activities of their church, which they are supporting by their offerings. Here too, they must take steps to remove the compromise from their confession.

If their private confession, however, reveals that they are aware of the false teaching of their church and defend it, we should not practice any religious fellowship with them even in our private relationships. We must warn them strongly that their adherence to false doctrine is a barrier between us and them, and more importantly, between them and God.

How will we put these principles into practice? First, let us consider our actions in our own home. There is no reason for a Christian family to abandon prayer and family devotion when others are present with us at the table. This is no different than having guests with us at church. The host may proceed with prayer or a devotion as normal. We have no more reluctance to have our prayers heard by others than Paul did on his voyage to Rome (Acts 27:35). Our prayer may be a good testimony and example. We may, however, feel that we should not force our guests to be a "captive audience" to prayers or devotions which they do not approve of, but this is a question of manners and tact, not an issue of fellowship.

When we are guests at the table of a person who is not of our faith, and he speaks his prayer in our presence, we will permit him to do so without disturbing him, even if we cannot join him in his prayer.

We should not, however, join together in the prayers of an adherents of false



doctrine, either by asking them to lead our family in prayer or by joining together with their prayer.

### Civic Religious Ceremonies

Scripture teaches that people should not join together in worship and prayer unless they are agreed in doctrine. We should not participate in any religious activity which gives equal status to truth and error.

At civic religious ceremonies in the United States, such as opening prayers at sessions of government or other civic events, all denominations and even non-Christian religions are given equal status, as the duty of leading the service or providing an opening prayer is rotated among various clergy persons. Such a practice will be very confusing to the weak in faith. It gives the impression that all religions are equally pleasing to God.

I was once asked to conduct a baccalaureate service for the local public high school together with the liberal Lutheran pastor, who had driven many of my members from his congregation by his false teaching. What impression would it have given to the members of both congregations and to people in the community, if we would have conducted such a service together? In the minds of many it would have confirmed the all-too-common view that it really does not matter what you believe since all religions are basically the same and can cooperate.

Such a false impression can easily be given even when the adherents of opposing views do not participate in the same service, but take turns in successive services. Love requires us to give a clear testimony against religious indifference which treats truth and falsehood as equals.

Pastors of many denominations do not believe that agreement in doctrine is necessary for joint prayer and worship, so they see no problem in worshipping with people who hold unscriptural views. Others may feel that they can participate as a testimony to their own view, without giving the impression that they are granting equal recognition to error, but such a distinction will seldom be clear to the general public. Our pastors, therefore, do not participate in such civic services and devotions.

Just as a person may occasionally be present at services of a heterodox church for reasons other than to join in the worship, a member of our church may be present on civic occasions which are opened with unionistic prayers. For example, a member of the Congress might be present when legislative sessions begin with prayer. He, however, should not join in such prayers or assist in setting them up. He should also use his influence to eliminate such prayers that are intended to unite people of various faiths in worship.

This problem may be even more common in countries which have a state religion. Naaman appears to have been thinking of such a situation when he asked Elisha to pardon his presence at heathen prayers (2 Kings 5:17-19). As an aide to the king of Syria his civic responsibilities often required him to be present for heathen rites, to rise and kneel when everyone else did, but he would not join in that worship.

### Participation In Political Action Groups And Social Groups

## Which Have A Religious Perspective

Can WELS members belong to political action groups which are formed "to preserve, protect, and promote traditional and Judeo-Christian values through education, legal defense, legislative programs, humanitarian aid, and related activities which represent the concerns of men and women who believe in these values"? Such groups are organized to fund and implement political action which is aimed at influencing government policy on such issues as taxation, abortion, education, homosexuals in the military, and so on.

Christians, of course, should not belong to any organization which requires them to accept principles or teachings which are contrary to the Bible. Nor should they join in prayer and worship with groups or individuals who hold teachings contrary to the Bible. They should not offer financial support to such organizations. The Masonic Lodge and Shriners would be examples of such organizations.

The task of drawing clear lines may become more difficult when the organization in question is not a religious organization and has no religious requirements, but it does have some religious activities or motivations attached to it. In such cases a number of considerations may help Christians decide to what degree, if any, they may be involved.

For sake of obtaining information Christians can buy books or subscribe to periodicals even from groups whose philosophy they reject and which they would not join. For example, our synodical libraries subscribe to many periodicals which are published by groups our students could not join. The subscription price paid is for goods received. A somewhat similar situation may exist at times with such groups as the YMCA. The foundations of this organization are Christian and full membership involves religious activity. But the organization recognizes a different level of "membership" at which the participants simply become users of the athletic facilities in exchange for a certain payment.

As citizens WELS members may participate in political action groups which try to influence legislation and government policies in order to bring them into closer agreement with the moral principles set forth in the Bible. For example, members of WELS Lutherans for Life might also be members of a non-religious right-to-life group in which they join with people of other faiths or of no faith at all in efforts to influence government policy. In the WELS's own right to life organization changing people's hearts through God's law and gospel would be their primary goal and method. In the secular group changing people's minds through education and changing their conduct through civil law would be the goals.

A problem arises when such organizations begin to blur the line between religious groups and non-sectarian political action groups by introducing prayer or other religious activities into their program. (The same problem can arise in groups as different as the local garden club, an ethnic society, or a business organization.) If such activities are an essential activity of the group and are prominent in its program, we should not join the group or participate in its activities. If the objectionable activity is incidental to the purpose and program of the group (such as prayer at the opening of the meeting), Christians should refrain from participating in that activity and should express their objections to the practice. They may participate in the regular, secular functions of the group.

An additional problem with many political action groups which are under heavy Reformed or Catholic influence is that they often confuse the responsibility of the church and its members (that is, changing people's conduct by first changing their hearts with the gospel) with the responsibility of the state and its citizens (that is, changing people's conduct by enforcing beneficial laws). Many of these groups believe efforts to change society by lobbying and legislation are part of the mission of the church. Christians should be clear on the distinction between what they do as church members (for example, preaching the 6th Commandment to lead people to repentance) and what they do as citizens (for example, seeking laws against various forms of sexual immorality as a protection to individuals and society). If you are a member of a group which seems to be confusing the roles of church and state, try to get the group refocused on the proper goals. If the confusion is deeply embedded in the group's program and philosophy, I would discontinue membership in the group.

A third problem arises when such groups see themselves as an ecumenical leaven which brings diverse churches together, as in the statement of a pro-life leader, "The Lord is using unborn babies to unify his Church." If this is an aim of the group, we should not participate, even if its activities are otherwise unobjectionable.

In all of these matters, we should distinguish between practices and attitudes which are inherent in the group's philosophy and occasional aberrations which are the views or actions only of isolated individuals.

In short, don't join any organization without inquiring about its beliefs and practices. If either its beliefs or practices conflict with the Bible, don't join. If incidental violations of biblical principles arise, object to them and do not participate in them. If subsequent to joining, you find that membership is involving you in beliefs or practices contrary to Scripture or if activities involved in membership trouble your conscience, quit.

#### Political Action By Church Groups

As stated above, it is not the duty of the church to lobby the government for laws that enforce Christian conduct. The church may petition the government when laws are being considered which would interfere with the mission of the church, such as laws which would interfere with the freedom of Christian schools. In such cases, we have participated in joint lobbying efforts with other groups which share our concerns in the area, such as the LC-MS and the Catholic Church. Such activities do not involve joint prayer and worship, but defense of civil rights.

#### Outside Speakers At Our Events

Various WELS organizations or schools may invite lecturers from outside our fellowship to present information to their group. This does not involve fellowship if no worship or religious instruction are involved, but only the giving of information. In situations which might create unclarity, such as a series of public lectures presented at a seminary or college of our fellowship, it is wise to make a specific announcement that these lectures are being presented outside the framework of fellowship. This is regularly done at the Bethany Reformation Lectures. If you think that the lecturer might have a misconception of his role, speak to him in advance.

The same principles apply to academic associations, such as church history or archeology societies.

#### Publications

We have not regarded the publication of an author's materials as an expression of fellowship with him. Northwestern Publishing House has published numerous works of non-WELS authors and has given Concordia Publishing House rights to distribute *The People's Bible*.

On the other hand, cooperative efforts to develop religious materials require unity in doctrine. Even when each author is responsible for his own material, the impression of fellowship can readily be given. For this reason, our seminary faculty recently declined an invitation to participate in Concordia's project to develop a series of commentaries for pastors.

In the case of *The People's Bible* we are taking advantage of an opportunity to have our materials reach a large audience, which will benefit from their scriptural presentation. In the case of the *Concordia Commentary* we are concerned not to have our names attached to a project in which doctrinal positions might be presented which are not in agreement with Scripture on such issues as church fellowship, church and ministry, and the Antichrist. Neither case necessarily involves fellowship, but the effect and the likely impression is different in the two cases.

#### Conclusion

In 1 Timothy 1, immediately after telling Timothy to oppose false teachers, Paul says, "The goal of this commandment is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." We dare not lose sight of the reason that we practice the biblical principles of church fellowship: The goal of this commandment is love, love for the errorist, love for his victims, love for anyone who is threatened by his false teachings, and love for God and his truth. To withhold the truth from someone who needs it, to silently go along with error--this can never be love. To be silent in the presence of error, which sweeps people away to hell, makes me as guilty--no, more guilty than the person who silently stands by and watches a fire burn up a house and its sleeping inhabitants. Love requires me to cry out, love requires me to warn. To be silent because I don't want to offend anyone, because I don't want to be labeled "intolerant," because I love the praise of men more than the praise of God--this is not love, this is selfishness. Let us never be guilty of sleeping on duty like unfaithful watchmen. We must sound a clear warning against all false teaching. We must work together for the truth; we can do nothing against the truth. These two principles direct us in all the decisions we must make concerning the practice of church fellowship.

We must, of course, always be on guard against pride and a self-righteous attitude. We must guard against tactlessness and against inconsistencies which will cause people to lose confidence in our judgment. We should not lose sight of the difference between false teachers and their victims (Jude 1:12, 22) But we must not let a recognition of our own imperfection intimidate us into a neglect of our God-given duty to warn against error. Our acceptance of our duty to warn against error must always be paralleled by our willingness to listen to warning when we need it. If we first pull the plank out of our own eye, we will see clearly to pluck the speck of sawdust out of our brother's eye.

If we keep our eyes focused on the blessed purposes for the principles of church fellowship--to testify to the truth and to warn against error--we will not dread the task of applying these principles to all areas of our life as Christians. We will recognize that this is just one more way we can serve our neighbors in love.

John Brug  
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