

The Scriptural Principles of Fellowship Applied in an Area Lutheran High School Setting

By David Kuske

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A. The Scriptural Principles of Fellowship

1. Definition of Fellowship:
 - a. Church fellowship is each Christian integrating the activity of his faith with that of other believers. (“Essay on Church Fellowship,” Carl Lawrenz). Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of their common faith by Christians who on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another. (WELS Church Fellowship Theses)
 - b. Everything a Christian does is done to the glory of God. But not every activity a Christian does together with others is a joint expression or demonstration of common faith – an integration of the activity of his faith with that of others (e.g. praying together vis-à-vis playing baseball together).
2. God's Commands in Regard to Fellowship
 - a. Treasure and practice fellowship with all fellow believers. (Eph 4:3; 1 Jn 1:3; Col 3:16; He 10:24f)
 - b. If a person is a weak Christian, show love to him by nurturing him and encouraging his growth in faith. (Eph 4:2,14,15; Mt 12:20; Ja 5:19,20)
 - c. If a person is a persistent errorist, show love to him by not practicing fellowship with him in order to warn him about the spiritual danger that his error poses to his soul. (Tit 3:10; Ro 16:17; 2 Tim 2:17)
3. Love and the Practice of Fellowship
 - a. Since fellowship is a glorious blessing of God, Scripture urges us to practice it as often as possible and in as many ways as possible with other Christians. We have a special debt of love toward those who are weak in understanding. God wants us to help them grow by instruction so that their weakness does not become a means by which Satan can destroy their soul in time of temptation or trial (Jude 22-23a; Eph 4:14; Mk 4:17; Ja 5:19,20). But Scripture also places limitations on the practice of fellowship. Practicing these limitations is also a debt of love that is equally important. God wants us to avoid fellowship with a person who clings to an error in order to warn him that his error can be the means by which Satan destroys his faith (2 Tim 2:17; Ga 5:9).
 - b. When we avoid fellowship with a persistent errorist (cf B,3, a person who insists the error he believes is the truth), the aim is not to prevent him from hearing the truth. Instead, in love for his soul, our goal is to give a clear testimony to him that to believe what is true and to avoid everything that is false can mean the difference between eternal life and eternal death (Rev 22:18,19).
 - d. Practicing the limitations that God places on fellowship is also done to show love by protecting those in our fellowship against the yeast of falsehood that might otherwise work its way through the truth which we believe (Ga 5:9) and so destroy the pure doctrine that is vital to our remaining in faith. In our practice of fellowship we must always be concerned as much about protecting the faith of our fellow believers as we are about warning the errorist (2 Co 11:3). This means that we avoid compromising with error or even giving the impression to our fellow believers of compromising with error.

- e. It is not love:
 - i. to fail to speak the truth to someone who is weak in understanding.
 - ii. to be silent about falsehood (because we don't want to be labeled as unloving) when speaking to someone who belongs to a church that teaches error.
 - iii. to be tactless in what we say, or inconsistent in our practice, either of which may turn people against the truth.
 - iv. to use the fact that we are often weak in faith as an excuse to neglect our God-given obligation to warn others against error.
- 4. **Significance for the area high school setting:** Love requires that our area high school be ready to share the truth with others at all times. At the same time, love requires that our area high school be equally ready to confess the truth that doctrinal differences have eternal significance and, for the sake of all involved—inquirers (cf. B,4,b), students, congregations—to avoid giving the impression that there can ever be a compromise of truth with error.

B. Distinguishing Between a Weak Christian, a Persistent Errorist, and an Inquirer

1. Recognizing that we are united with others in faith can be done only on the basis of their public confession of faith (Ro 10:10). The kind of public confession which tells us that others are united with us can only be a confession that they accept the entire word of God (Re 22:18,19).
2. When we speak of fellowship and refer to a person as “weak Christian,” we mean a person of our fellowship whose understanding of some portion of God's word needs clarification or correction, or whose acceptance of some portion of God's word needs to be strengthened. Dealing with a “weak Christian” does not call for us to break fellowship with him but to use our fellowship with him to help him overcome this weakness. (N. B. The term “weak Christian” can also be used of a Christian with whom we are not in fellowship. But how God wants us to act toward such a person is different and is dealt with below in 4,b and 5,b.)
3. By “persistent errorist” we mean a Christian who in spite of patient admonition continues in a sin, or who in spite of instruction not only accepts an error in doctrine but insists that his understanding of that doctrine is the correct one and promotes his error publicly. We can not recognize such a person as a Christian brother with whom we can practice fellowship.
4. An “inquirer” may be one of the following:
 - a. There may be a person from another denomination who leaves that denomination, declares that he is in fellowship with us, but needs to be instructed in some areas of doctrine prior to his being accepted into membership in one of our congregations. Normally we would not permit such a person to take a public part in our worship (sing a solo, play the organ, read a Scripture portion), to hold an office (e.g., chairman of the men's club), or to take the lead in a congregational activity (captain of the ladies volleyball team or the organizer of a charitable activity) prior to his completion of this instruction.
 - b. There may also be a person of another denomination who makes a fine confession of Christian faith and with whom we find ourselves in agreement on most of the catechism truths we discuss. Such a person may also indicate that he accepts the entire Bible as God's word. At the same time he may have no inkling of the inconsistency of that statement with his membership in a heterodox church. The doctrinal errors, the false practice, or the unionism in which his denomination is involved may not be apparent to him or may have escaped his attention. As the opportunity presents itself, we will witness to him in regard to the truth. If he responds positively to this witness, we might meet with him often over an extended period of time to continue our witness to him about the truth. At the same time, as a result of our witness to him, he hopefully will understand that we are bound by our conscience not to fellowship with him publicly because of the errors

taught in his denomination even though he may not fully understand all that is erroneous about those teachings as yet.

5. Proselytizing
 - a. We have no call to approach a person who belongs to a Christian denomination not in fellowship with us if the gospel is present in that church. Where the gospel is present, the Spirit can work faith in believers in spite of the errors that also may be present, and the pastor called by those believers is their shepherd.
 - b. However, if we have the opportunity to share the truth with a person of another denomination, or if such a person comes to us and asks us about our faith, or even seeks that he or other members of his family be instructed by us in regard to the truth, we will share the truth with him (them).
6. Pluralism (being in fellowship in both an orthodox and heterodox church at the same time) for any length of time blurs a person's understanding of what is falsehood and what is truth and inevitably leads to the watering down of the truth in favor of falsehood. (Ga 5:9)
7. **Significance for the area high school setting:** The person from another denomination who wishes to enroll in our area high school is not a “weak Christian” and seldom a “persistent errorist.” Most come close to the “inquirer” described in 4,b. To enroll such a student is not proselytizing, but the leaven of pluralism requires that there be a constant, consistent, and clear confession that doctrinal differences do have eternal significance. While we are ready to share the truth with him, we can't permit a student to minister publicly to the student body or an association congregation, or to hold a position where he becomes a leader in the student body, as long as he remains a member of non-WELS/ELS church.

C. Things That Are Parallel in an Area High School Setting to Fellowship Matters in a Congregation

1. Each day at school students do have worship activities. The attendance of a non-WELS/ELS students at these worship services is parallel to a person of another denomination attending Sunday worship at one of our churches.
 - a. Our services are not conducted in an ecumenical spirit which says that what is taught and what those present believe doesn't really matter. Often the sermon, a prayer, or a hymn will speak about the matter of true and false doctrine.
 - b. A non-member is not permitted to take part in any public activity which involves ministry to the congregation (singing in the choir, singing a solo, playing the organ, reading a gospel or epistle lesson).
 - c. Not permitting those of another faith to attend the Lord's Supper is a clear public testimony to nonmembers in attendance at our worship service that there are doctrinal differences that prevent us from considering them to be one in faith with us.
2. If a non-member wishes to attend a Bible class in our congregation, we would normally welcome him to do so as long as it was clear that he was present to learn. If, however, he begins to propagandize for his faith in any way or insists that his error is the truth, we might well quickly and clearly uninvite him.
3. If a non-member goes through a BIC class but is not ready to join the congregation, he will be welcomed to attend worship services and Bible classes, he may be allowed to take part in some non-fellowship service activities of the congregation (e.g. setting up chairs, providing food for a pot-luck meal, etc.) but may not attend Holy Communion, be involved in any activity that involves public ministering to the congregation, or hold a position where he becomes a leader of the congregation or a part of the congregation.
4. **Significance for the area high school setting:** We are ready to share the truth with the student who is an inquirer at the high school, just as we are in the congregational setting, as long as he remains a willing learner. We will continue to do this even if, after lengthy instruction, he is not

ready to join our fellowship. At the same time we also owe him, our WELS/ELS students, and the high school association's congregations a constant, consistent, and clear testimony that doctrinal differences do have eternal significance. In the high school setting this can be done, just as it is done in the congregational setting, by not permitting him to hold a position where he becomes a leader in the student body, and by not permitting him to be involved in any public activity that involves ministering to the student body or an association congregation.

D. Some Things That Are Different in the Area Lutheran High School Setting

1. Unlike grade school students, WELS/ELS high school students have completed a study of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. Thus in the high school setting the subject of fellowship can be dealt with on the basis of the students' more mature knowledge of God's word.
2. The spirit of ecumenicalism is widespread in our day. It effects many of the people in our fellowship, especially our teens. Fads and popular attitudes, also religious ones, gain the attention of teens quite easily. Most teens have a deep desire to be accepted by others. Many teens have not matured emotionally and so are often influenced more by their emotions than by their reason. For these reasons, unless teens know the principles of fellowship well and see them put into practice in a loving way, the spirit of ecumenicalism may have a strong influence on them.
3. Non-WELS/ELS students have their feet in two camps. They are members of a denomination with which we are not in fellowship, and at the same time their parents have placed them under the spiritual care of the teachers whom we have called to nurture the teenagers of our fellowship. Because these students have their feet in two camps, unless such students come as willing learners (inquirers), they can undermine the purpose of our high school, namely, to nurture the students of our fellowship in the truth. For the same reason, unless our high school also puts into practice the aforementioned limitations (cf. C,4), it will mute its testimony to all involved (the inquirers and their parents, the students of our fellowship and their parents, the members of the association congregations) that doctrinal differences do have eternal significance.
4. Non-WELS/ELS students are still subject to their parents. This has a number of ramifications:
 - a. The parents need to be told that their children will be taught things that are not in agreement with the doctrine of the church to which they belong.
 - b. The parents need to be informed about what we believe about fellowship on the basis of Scripture and how this will affect their children enrolled in our school.
 - c. A student may want to join our fellowship as a result of the instruction he receives in our school but may be prevented from doing so by his parents.
5. The instruction of a non-WELS/ELS student may extend over a period of four years instead of only a number of months (the normal time frame of a Bible Information Class). This makes all the more necessary a constant, consistent, and clear confession that doctrinal differences do have eternal significance.
6. Teachers will need to take special pains to direct non-WELS/ELS students to orthodox sources for any class reports dealing with biblical doctrine that such students are asked to make. Teachers will also need to avoid a situation where non-WELS/ELS students would be publicly ministering to other students in the classroom.
7. **Significance for the area high school setting:** Because of the various factors that are unique in the area high school setting, along with the sharing of the truth there must also be a constant, consistent, and clear witness to the truth that doctrinal differences have eternal significance. These unique factors in the high school setting make this witness as important as, if not more important than, in the congregational setting.

E. Points That It Would Be Good to Include in a Policy Regarding the Enrollment of Non-WELS/ELS Students

1. A way of determining the attitude of the parents and the student in regard to his/her enrollment. (e.g. Is the student coming as a willing learner? Or is the student one who is coming with the idea that he can propagandize for his faith?)
2. A way of making sure that parents of the student are informed about the differences in doctrine between WELS/ELS and the church body of the prospective student.
3. A way of discussing with the parents and the prospective student what the Bible teaches about fellowship so that they understand why the student may not be involved in any leadership position in the student body, or in public ministering to the student body or the congregations of the association, while he continues at the same time to hold membership in a heterodox denomination.
4. A clear statement about what activities involve being a leader in the student body or public ministering either to the student body or to the congregations of the association so that practice does not vary from administration to faculty or from one faculty member to another. (Any inconsistency in practice can easily undermine the testimony to all involved that doctrinal differences do have eternal significance.)
5. A way of sharing with the whole student body at regular intervals both what the Bible teaches about fellowship and why a non-WELS/ELS student is enrolled at our school, participates in worship and religion classes, but may not be a leader in the student body, or be included in activities that involve public ministering either to the student body or the congregations in the association.
6. A way of monitoring non-WELS/ELS students during their enrollment to determine whether the enrollment may continue even if the parents or the student do not join a WELS/ELS congregation. (e.g. Does the student continue to be a willing learner? Or is the student one who is beginning to propagandize for his faith, or one who is undermining the spirit of the school especially by what he does in worship or in religion class, for example, openly shows disinterest, does not do assigned class work with a willing spirit, etc.)
7. A way of showing special concern for a student who indicates his interest in joining the WELS/ELS but who is prevented from doing so by his parents.