

Fellowship Principles - High School Activities

[Wisconsin Lutheran High School Teachers Conference]

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A newspaper columnist for the Saint Paul Dispatch listed two sure ways to ruin your reputation. One—give candy to a child and the second—be president of the United States. He forgot the third way—write a paper on fellowship principles in respect to high school activities.

Before we can establish any type of guidelines for such principles or examine any practical examples, we should first define “fellowship” and study the various passages of Scripture which teach such a doctrine. The Commission on Doctrine matters of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has defined Church Fellowship to be “... 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.” Arnold H. Grumm, in an essay entitled “Church Fellowship” written in 1946 for the Centennial Series published in the *Abiding Word* uses the following phrases to define “fellowship” - “communion, and association, of like-minded people”. Church fellowship then he defines as a “communion on a spiritual level”. Thus such bond of true fellowship is inward and invisible, for it is the saving faith in Christ Jesus, as Paul reminded the Galatians (Gal. 3:26-28) “Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus... ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” In order to have true church fellowship a personal fellowship with Christ by faith must exist.

Scripture leads us to this concept of church fellowship with some pertinent passages... Galatians 3:26 and 4:16 show that the Holy Spirit unites us with our God through faith in Christ. Saving faith can never be inactive. It is bound openly to confess the Savior. Faith and confession go together. The Romans are reminded by the Apostle Paul (10:10) - “With the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” At the same time this Spirit instilled faith unites us in a close union with all other believers - John in his first epistle (1:3) writes - “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ.” Such passages as “He that is of God heareth God’s Word: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God,” (John 8:47). “For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” - Acts 4:20 = not to omit the basis for the theme of our 1971 Synod Convention at Watertown, Wisconsin from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians (4:13) - “We having the same spirit of faith, according to as it is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe and therefore speak” and the familiar passage from I Peter 2:9 - “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” - all these support the truth that faith invariably expresses itself in activity which is spiritual in nature, yet, outwardly manifest, for example in the use of the means of grace, in prayer, in praise and worship, in our gifts of time, talent, and treasure for the church, in Christian testimony, in furthering the cause of the Gospel, and in deeds of Christian love.

Again it is the Holy Spirit who causes us to perform these fruits of faith which He works and preserves in our heart through the means of grace, as Paul reminds us in his letter to the Ephesians (2:10) - “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” The Holy Spirit also leads us to express and manifest our faith jointly with fellow believers. A bond of fellowship was established between Paul, Barnabas and Peter, James, and John. In Galatians 2:9 Paul writes - “And when

James, Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship.” This bond of fellowship also exists between congregations - Paul writes in his first letter to the Thessalonians (4:9-10) “But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you, for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more.”

Although we may classify these expressions of faith in various ways, for example, altar, pulpit and prayer fellowship; fellowship in church work, mission work, Christian education and Christian charity, yet they are joint expressions of faith and are essentially one and the same things: church fellowship. For that reason our Synod’s Commission on Doctrinal matters has stated “Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation and demonstration of a common faith.” Thus when Paul urges the Romans to cease fellowship with errorists, he admonishes them in a general way - “Avoid them” (16:17).

Scripture also outlines certain principles which should be followed in the exercise of such church fellowship. Since “the Lord knoweth them that are his (II Tim. 2:9) and since “man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (I Sam. 16:7) it would be foolish for us to try to recognize Christians on basis of the personal faith in their hearts. The only basis for selecting individuals or groups for a joint expression of faith can be their confession. Such confession of faith is always a confession of the entire Word of God. The denial or changing of any word of God stems not from faith but from unbelief. Jesus spoke to those Jews which believed in Him, “If ye continue in my Word then are ye my disciples, indeed...” - John 8:31. And we all recall from the last chapter of the Bible what will happen to anyone who adds or takes away anything from the words of Scripture - (Rev. 22:18-10).

But we are all weak in one way or another. The faith of Christians and its manifestations are marked by many imperfections. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us of this quite clearly - “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need some to teach you again the first principles of God’s Word. You need milk and not solid food.” (5:12) Many passages in Scripture reveal that weakness in faith is not in itself a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an encouragement to practice it more zealously to help one another in overcoming particular weaknesses. How often didn’t Paul show patience in building up with the Gospel the weak faith of Christians in Colossi (Jewish-Gnostic error) and in Galatia (Judaizing error) to overcome the error that had affected them.

However if persistent adherence to false doctrine and practice continues, Scripture calls for termination of fellowship. Matthew 18:17 reminds us that we must terminate church fellowship with one who after brotherly admonition impenitently clings to sin. We realize that such excommunication is carried out in love for his and our own spiritual welfare. Likewise such passages as Romans 16:17, 18 and Galatians 1:8-9 urge us to cease fellowship with those who persistently adhere to error in doctrine or practice after patient admonition. Also if we practice church fellowship with persistent errorists, we become partakers of their evil deeds, (II John 11)

Thus, two Christian principles direct us in our exercise of church fellowship 1. Love for the weak brother. 2. Avoiding those who persistently adhere to false doctrine and practice and all who make themselves partakers of their evil deeds. Being aware of both of these principles will lead us to an evangelical practice in facing the many difficult situations that confront us in the area of high school activities and properly lie in the field of casuistry.

Truly a Christian confession of faith is the basis and prerequisite for Christian fellowship, yet we must distinguish with Scripture between an adherent of false doctrine or practice and a weak brother in faith. Are our students “weak brothers” who need the strengthening of the God’s Word and for that reason have enrolled in our school? Weakness of one kind or another is nothing unusual in Christians. Paul reminds us (Phil. 3:12) - “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, that I may apprehend that for which I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.” Weakness among Christians underlies the apostolic admonition Paul gives to the Thessalonians (I Thess. 5:14) - “Warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men.” Once again recall the Hebrews passage referred to earlier in the paper, (Heb. 5:12) informing us that Christians first have to be instructed in the milk of God’s Word and are not ready as yet for strong meat of God’s truth. Truly we recognize the weakness of faith and Christian understanding in the Church.

Our Synod’s presentation of the Scriptural principles of church fellowship clearly states (B,4) “Weakness in faith is in itself not a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an inducement for practicing it vigorously to help one another overcome our individual weaknesses. In precept and example Scripture abounds with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak”. Regarding the weak brother, Walther Thesis II on Church Fellowship states - “The error of an individual member of the Church even against the clear Word of God does not involve immediately his actual forfeiture of church fellowship, nor of the association of brethren and colleagues.” Thesis IV says “A Christian may be so weak in understanding that he cannot grasp, even in a case of a fundamental article of the second order, that an error which he holds is contrary to the Scriptures. Because of his ignorance he may also continue in his error, without thereby making it necessary for the orthodox church to exclude him.” On the other hand Thesis IX reminds us - “Such members as willfully persist in deviating from the Word of God, no matter what question it may concern, must be excluded.”

Again from these observations on church fellowship two basic Christian principles emerge - 1. Love your brother weak in the faith. 2. Avoid persistent errorists who adhere to false doctrine and practice or those who practice church fellowship with errorists.

How do these principles apply to some practical examples of church fellowship as they occur in area Lutheran high schools - especially in extra-curricular activities? Perhaps, a quick review of the results of the survey sent to 15 area Lutheran high schools will serve as a springboard for further discussion. We had a 100% return of the surveys. Ten area Lutheran high schools have non-WELS and non-ELS students participating in their instrumental groups. Of these four do have these groups play for chapel services. One of the negative responses indicated the reason for non-participation was due to lack of opportunity rather than any policy which forbid such participation. Nine of the ten schools which allow participation by non-WELS and non-ELS students in their instrumental groups, have these groups perform in sacred concerts. Six instrumental groups from their respective schools participate in worship services in WELS and ELS congregations. There was no indication whether the other four did not participate because of lack of opportunity or because of certain policies forbidding it. I would tend to suspect that it was because of lack of opportunity in light of the responses to activities regarding choral groups.

Twelve area Lutheran high school groups have non-WELS and non-ELS students participating in their various school choral groups. These same choral groups with non-WELS and non-ELS students also participate in sacred concerts at the schools and worship services in area WELS and ELS congregations. Eleven sing in chapel services at their respective schools.

Boards of control from six high schools have had discussions regarding fellowship principles relating to student participation in worship situations. One decided they needed a more thorough study and requested a copy of this paper. Now they will really be convinced they need a more thorough study. Another summarized it briefly with this statement - "If they are accepted students in our student body, they participate in school affairs." Minutes from the Board of Control of Evergreen Lutheran High School state: "It was moved, seconded and carried to respectfully decline the recommendation of the committee. This matter was returned to the committee with the following recommendation for wording: 'Be it resolved that all presentations of a devotional nature by students of Evergreen Lutheran High School during off-campus appearances be under the continuous supervision and prior approval of a faculty member, and be it further resolved that all solo performances, whether oral, vocal or instrumental, which are presentations of God's Word be performed by students of our fellowship.'" Resolution for approval of this recommendation has not been made yet, according to Wayne Baxmann, principal of Evergreen Lutheran High School. One response indicated that if they are accepted students in their student body, they may participate in school affairs. Another with very similar wording stated: "If they are enrolled in school, they may participate in school-sponsored activities." One Board concluded that the matter needed more study. The Board of the sixth school which studied the matter stated that they were in general agreement with the school policy. Wouldn't you know it - questions 7-8 appeared asking whether the school had a policy regarding participation on non-WELS and non-ELS students in worship activities and requesting a copy of that policy.

Three schools stated that they had such a policy regarding participation in worship activities. "They may participate in school chapel, chorus, and concert activities," stated one school but quickly referred to question number ten to which they gave a strong negative response - "Do such students lead classroom devotions or chapel devotions either by reading of Scripture, leading with a prayer, or whatever." The unwritten policy of another school forbids "leading" in worship activities, such a student chapel. An interim administrative policy of the third school that gave an affirmative response to having a policy states - "Since the *group* is definitely WELS we allow the whole group to function. However, in *sacred* music or worship activities no highlighting by solo, duet, etc., of a non-WELS student (either instrumental or vocal)." One school indicated that they have students leading classroom devotions or chapel devotions, but clearly indicated in their response to the next and final question that non-WELS and non-ELS students may not participate in this activity.

Do these responses indicate that we are fencing the issue by making a distinction according to types or degrees of participation in worship activities, rather than facing the issue and determining whether we can out of love call this student a "weak brother in the faith who needs the strengthening of God's Word of truth" through fellowship and learning in our midst; or whether we must label him an "errorist" who persistently adheres to false doctrine and practice and thus refrain from any type of church fellowship with him? Or perhaps these responses indicating factors governing participation in worship activities by non-WELS and non-ELS students in our schools are actually saying that indeed such students are errorists, but since they are not in leading roles of worship activity no church fellowship principles are being violated.

Whatever is the case I think it is necessary to determine whether we are dealing with a weak brother in the faith, a persistent errorist who adheres to false doctrine and practice, or a student who practices church fellowship with persistent errorists and thus becomes partakers of their evil deeds - 2 John verse 11.

If we feel that these non-WELS and non-ELS students are weak brothers in the faith, then we should regard them as any other student in our fellowship. They may be selected to read Luke 2 at the Christmas concert, to lead the class in the opening prayer at the beginning of the day, or to sing a solo with a choral group enhancing a worship service at one of our congregations. Responses from the surveys reveal that no area Lutheran high school regards any such student as a “weak brother” in the faith who needs milk and not strong food.

The very fact that such students are enrolled in our schools and are learning the truths of God’s Word as God intended them to be taught, I think we would all agree that we would not place any of these students in the second category of “errorist who persistently adhere to false doctrine and practice.” Any who would fall into this description should not be in our high schools for Scripture warns us that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.

Most would probably conclude that the non-WELS and non-ELS students in our schools are Christians who practice church fellowship with persistent errorists, and thus Romans 16:17 and other passages apply forbidding any type of church fellowship activities to occur. Thus we conclude that they may not participate in any leadership role in worship activity but may participate in group activities of a worship nature whether they be small singing groups or large choirs because in such situations the director is leading the worship, who is a member of WELS or the group itself is leading the worship and the group as a group is in fellowship with the WELS.

For some reason I never hear the same reasoning applied to choirs or singing groups of the congregation. Is there a double standard applied here? Yet in some of those same congregations those little Latin-American Catholics are singing in the Vacation Bible school choir during the summer and are “preaching the sermon to us” on Christmas eve as one pastor described the recitations of the Christian Day school students in the children’s service.

I am sure there is no doubt that these students would be placed in the “weak brother” category still in need of the liquid milk to nourish their weak faith. They’re still learning will be the defense. And I certainly would concur. And thus in some Christian Day schools the older students do open the day with a prayer they composed at home. And not all of them are WELS or ELS students. I wish I would have taken the time to survey the elementary schools of our Synod to see how church fellowship practices may differ from those of the high school students and schools.

But comes the quick reply - high school students are confirmed. They have promised to remain faithful to a church which is not in fellowship with us. So did the first grader at his baptism. Confirmation is a man made selection of time and process for promising faithfulness to God. Does the student of the eighth grade ninth month have a knowledge complete enough to know the difference in Synods and church fellowship especially since he was not confirmed in one of our churches?

Church fellowship has been defined. Scriptural principles have been outlined. Seemingly inconsistent applications have been revealed. A discussion must follow! I didn’t give any candy to a child. I am not president of the United States. But I think my reputation may be in question!