Anschauungen

(än´ shou´ oong en) n. Ger.
Opinions, Viewpoints.

By Mark Braun, acting editor in chief of CHARIS

NOTE: The opinions expressed in this column are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Board of Directors of The CHARIS Institute, the CHARIS Editorial Review Board, or Wisconsin Lutheran College. Reactions to the opinions in this column should be addressed directly to the author.

The Framework of Fellowship

CHARIS reported last winter on the development of what might best be described as the ecclesiastical version of political action groups in the WELS, one of which calls itself Issues in WELS (IIW).

At its January 2006 meeting, those in attendance at IIW approved a resolution strongly encouraging the Synod’s Conference of Presidents to declare a synod-wide moratorium on the practice of WELS churches and groups inviting non-WELS speakers to address them “until we as a Synod have had opportunity to study the matter thoroughly and resolve it in a God-pleasing way” (“Changes in the Wisconsin Synod,” Vol. 5, Number 1, pp. 25-26).

Following the cancellation of the CHARIS Symposium last March, the COP announced that it stood by its 1999 policy allowing outside speakers “because it is consistent with our fellowship principles.” Yet one correspondent to CHARIS charged that the COP had supplied no scriptural evidence in support of its position and that “many pastors and others in our Synod believe that this is indeed a violation of biblical fellowship principles” (“Church Door Firestorm Part I,” Vol. 5, Number 2, p. 24).

At a meeting of the Barnabas Group, a gathering of WELS pastors and lay people in Milwaukee on September 13, a spokesperson for IIW reported the group’s opposition to any non-WELS speakers who addressed WELS groups “on scriptural, spiritual, or religious matters.”

A resolution from the September 4-5, 2006 meeting of IIW has been submitted for the Book of Reports and Memorials for the 2007 Synod convention. The resolution is here reprinted in full:

To: The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in Convention 2007

Subject: Definition of the expression “Framework of Fellowship”

WHEREAS 1) various groups within the Synod have arranged for speakers not in fellowship with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) to address them on matters relating to doctrine and on practical aspects of conducting the ministry; and

WHEREAS 2) some in our Synod question whether seeking such instruction from the heterodox is consistent with Scripture’s urging to “watch out for false prophets” (Mt. 7:15) and “keep away from” errorists (Ro. 16:17) and whether welcoming the errorist may constitute “sharing in his wicked work” (2 John 1); and
WHEREAS 3) groups inviting such outside speakers have defended the practice with the explanation that the speakers were addressing them “outside the framework of fellowship”; and

WHEREAS 4) references to “the framework of fellowship” are appearing more frequently in the literature of the WELS, but there exists neither a clear and commonly-accepted definition of what that phrase entails nor a thorough explanation of how the phrase is consistent with Scriptural principles of Christian fellowship; and

WHEREAS 5) disagreement over this issue is threatening the bond of peace within our beloved Synod; and

WHEREAS 6) it has been argued that a new study of the Scriptural principles might cast doubt on the Synod’s current position of Christian fellowship; and

WHEREAS 7) a review of those principles that aim to supply an element not currently addressed in our doctrinal statements would not cast doubt on the Synod’s current doctrinal position on fellowship; therefore be it

Resolved a) that the Synod instruct the Conference of Presidents (COP) to conduct a thorough review of the Scriptural principles of fellowship with the aim of developing a clear and complete definition of what constitutes the “framework of fellowship” and a thorough explanation of how the phrase is consistent with Scriptural principles; and be it further

Resolved b) that the results of this study be published and shared broadly with the constituency of the WELS; and be it finally

Resolved c) that the COP be instructed respectfully to request that, in a spirit of brotherly cooperation, groups affiliated with the WELS defer from employing public speakers from outside the WELS fellowship who will discuss matters relating to doctrine and practical aspects of conducting the ministry until such a study can be completed.

The IIW spokesperson at the Barnabas meeting insisted that the group had not formed in opposition to other groups or organizations in the Synod (although other groups and organizations in the Synod have been criticized by name in presentations made at IIW meetings). “We are not in competition with any other group,” he said, “nor are we seeking to be a divisive group. We love our Synod” and “are concerned [that] our Synod [walks together] in doctrine and practice based on God’s Word.”

Accompanying the resolution on the IIW web site (http://www.issuesinwels.org) is this comment: “It is no secret where the IIW, in what we believe to be faithfulness to the Word of God, stands on this matter.”

Are there other WELS members who also love their Synod but who believe differently on this issue? If so, will they also urge the COP to restudy this matter, hoping that synodical leaders will maintain the current WELS position on speakers outside the “framework of fellowship”?

Antichrist as Election Issue

Having survived another election season, we once again grew accustomed to the charges and countercharges that political hopefuls typically direct at one another in the heat of battle: “She’ll raise taxes!” “He doesn’t care about our schools!” “They’re soft on Internet crime!”
To which we must now add: "She belongs to a church that says the Pope is the Antichrist!"

According the Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune (on October 30—just in time for Reformation and only a week before the election), during a live televised debate between two candidates for Minnesota’s Sixth District Congressional seat, WCCP reporter Pat Kessler said to Republican Michele Bachmann: "The church you belong to is affiliated with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, which, it says, regards the Roman Catholic pope as the antichrist. Is this true? Do you share the views of your church? And why should any Catholic in the Sixth District vote for you if it is true?"

Bachmann was reported to have called this charge "a false statement" and "religious bigotry." She said: "I love Catholics. I’m a Christian, and my church does not believe that the pope is the antichrist. That’s absolutely false." Bachmann spokeswoman Connie Siama added, “Good grief, that’s ridiculous.”

In short order, however, the Star Tribune referenced www.wels.net, which corroborates what Kessler alleged and Bachmann denied. “We thereby affirm that we identify this ‘antichrist’ with the papacy as it is known today,” the site explains, although “this neither means nor implies a blanket condemnation of all members of the Roman Catholic Church, for despite all the errors taught in that church, the Word of God is still heard there.”

A spokesman for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis commented only that the archdiocese “tries to stay out of political stuff.” But Catholics United for the Common Good, an online group based in Massachusetts, demanded that Bachmann denounce any identification of the pope as the Antichrist. Chris Corzen, Executive Director of Catholics United, charged that Bachmann “not only failed to apologize but even refused to acknowledge the WELS position that remains publicly accessible through its official web site.” Corzen called on Bachmann to answer “yes” or “no” to three “simple questions: Do you acknowledge that this belief is part of the teachings of the WELS church? Do you reject the claim that the Pope is the Antichrist? Do you unequivocally condemn WELS teaching on this issue?”

For a day or so, the Antichrist was the main topic on talk radio in and around the Sixth District. One caller noted the irony that as a WELS member, Bachmann’s position on abortion was closer to the pope than that of her opponent Patty Wetterling. Wetterling is reportedly pro-choice.

But the story soon lost legs. Ms. Bachmann won the election with just under 50 percent of the popular vote in a three-way race in a heavily Republican area.

Few would envy the position Ms. Bachmann found herself in at such a late date in the campaign. Yet she made a bad situation worse by stating so unequivocally that her church did not teach that position.

It is possible to have been confirmed in a WELS church and to go to worship nearly every Sunday without ever hearing, “The pope is the Antichrist.” The primary text on which this position is based, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, is not included among the three-year cycle of Scripture readings used in worship services. Most WELS pastors I know, while in agreement with the Synod’s position and even able to defend it when called upon to do so, are not looking to broach the subject from the pulpit or in their Bible classes.

It remains true, according to Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution, that “no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” But we must expect that religious tests will increasingly be applied among the media and in the public square. Candidates
are wise to be familiar with the doctrinal positions of the church to which they belong and prepared to answer for them.

**CHARIS and the CLC**

Just when we began to wonder who (if anyone) is reading the CHARIS journal, we found out that it is being read quite closely in the CLC.

For those unfamiliar with the alphabet soup of American Lutheranism, “CLC” stands for the Church of the Lutheran Confession. According to its web site (http://www.clclutheran.org), the CLC “considers itself to be the true spiritual descendant of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference, which was formed in 1872 and lasted until the early 1960s.” The CLC “emerged” from the WELS, the LCMS, and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) “when...the biblical doctrine of church fellowship on which [the Synodical Conference] rested was no longer fully practiced by the member churches.”

The CLC finds fault with both the WELS and the ELS for maintaining that church bodies must “make the judgment (‘come to the conviction’) that ‘admonition is of no further avail’ before termination of fellowship can take place.” By contrast, the CLC “holds that such a subjective judgment regarding the further results of admonition is not only impossible, because only God can read hearts, but also unnecessary.” The CLC has maintained, in opposition to the WELS, that the “watch out” of Romans 16:17-18 should not be separated from the “keep away from them.”

In its most recent *Journal of Theology*, CLC Pastor Emeritus Bertram J. Naumann attacks “A Red Herring in the WELS Fellowship Doctrine.” (For the entire article, see http://clclutheran.org/library/jtheo_arch/current.pdf, scroll down to page 14.) Pastor Naumann charges that, by introducing the term “persistent errorist” into the understanding of Romans 16, the WELS has “wittingly or unwittingly” strayed from “the action Scripture calls for in our dealing with false teachers.”

Disagreement concerning the term “persistent errorist” has divided the CLC from the WELS for almost half a century, but Pastor Naumann cited several recent CHARIS journal articles to support his accusation that the WELS is increasingly headed in “dangerous and unscriptural directions.”

Reviewing “A Statement Regarding Non-WELS Students in the College’s Choirs” (Vol. 4, Number 2, pp. 31-32), Pastor Naumann says that “with one grand sweep” the policy of Wisconsin Lutheran College “circumvents [Romans 16] in dealing with potential students outside of the WELS fellowship; this is done with the rationale that since all Christians are invisibly united in the One True Church, the Una Sancta, they need to determine, as best they are able, ‘whether [or not] a student acts out of weakness of faith or in persistent error.’ ”

Citing “It’s a Different World— Or Is It?” (Vol. 3, Number 1, especially pp. 27-28), Pastor Naumann asks, “Aren’t the floodgates of selective fellowship, if not blatant religious unionism, being opened wide here?” Quoting the CHARIS article, together with a statement from the WELS “Essay on Church Fellowship” referenced in that article, Pastor Naumann concludes, “In the quotation and example above we not only see evidence of how the WELS has formally adopted this word in its doctrinal statements; we also see the delaying effect which application of the ‘persistent errorist’ principle will invariably lead” (sic).

Pastor Naumann did not limit his accusations to articles from CHARIS. He also found fault with advice given by Dr. John Brug of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in a 2002 article of the Seminary’s Quarterly, and he criticized the answer offered on a wels.net Q and A.
It is significant that Pastor Naumann identifies the practice enunciated by Wisconsin Lutheran College as fully consistent with and the direct product of the WELS position on church fellowship.

Romans 16:17-18 addresses the perpetrators of false doctrine, not its victims. The passage warns against those who repeatedly and habitually “cause divisions and put obstacles in your way.” It does not speak to the person who in weakness speaks incorrectly about Scripture, or to someone who is poorly informed but willing to accept further instruction.

The position on church fellowship that the Wisconsin Synod held prior to the formation of the CLC recognized the distinction between weak Christians and persistent errorists. Already in 1954, in “The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship,” Prof. Carl Lawrenz acknowledged that every Christian’s faith is plagued by weakness, and “weakness of faith is not in itself a barrier for Christian fellowship” but “an inducement for exercising our fellowship for the purpose of helping our brethren overcome weakness.” Weak Christians, wrote Prof. Lawrenz, are differentiated from “scoffers and unbelievers” by their willingness to receive spiritual help and instruction (Theologische Quartalschrift 51 [October 1954]: 276-79).

Tract Ten on “Church Fellowship” written and distributed in the Wisconsin Synod in 1954 (the year before the momentous events of the 1955 Synod convention), maintained that there are “devout children of God in all synods who are not aware of their involvement with error through membership in a heterodox synod.” The author of Tract Ten offered the example of an ALC grandmother (even though the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods had never been in fellowship with the ALC) urging that we “receive” such a weak brother or sister and “tenderly help [him or her] overcome his weakness.” Receive, he added, “means that praying with him may well be in place and God-pleasing” (Curtis A. Jahn, ed., Essays on Church Fellowship, pp. 392-93).

In view of such statements, one can scarcely accept the CLC’s claim to being the “true spiritual descendant of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference.”

A Letter from Waldo Werning

In a letter dated November 9, 2006, Dr. Waldo Werning, one of the three scheduled speakers for the cancelled Church Door Symposium, wrote:

“As an orthodox Lutheran pastor, I found it shocking and offensive to read slanderous statements and false judgments [CHARIS, Vol. 5, Number 2, pp. 18-29] that are an obvious breaking of the eighth commandment against a Lutheran brother. The letters to the editor of CHARIS, a journal of Lutheran scholarship in WELS, are neither scholarly nor truthful.” Werning insisted that he and Dr. Kent Hunter are “faithful and orthodox Lutheran pastors” who have “written many books that are faithful to biblical and Lutheran doctrine.” Some of Werning’s books “have been reviewed in WELS publications and many WELS pastors have read them.”

New Guy on the Block

In June the CHARIS Board called Pastor Ronald Heins to serve as the Executive Director of CHARIS, replacing Dr. John Bauer, who left this position on March 31.

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He was a pastor in Brookings, South Dakota, and Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. He served at Bethesda Lutheran Home in Watertown and taught at Racine Lutheran High School; St. Paul’s College in Concordia, Missouri; and Michigan State University in East Lansing. He was the campus pastor at South Dakota State University and superintendent of the Wisconsin Lutheran High School Conference in Milwaukee. Most recently, Pastor Heins initiated and directed the WELS Parish Assistance program, serving for more than a decade as a parish planner, assisting WELS congregations and their staffs.

He is the husband of Prof. Mary Heins, who has taught Communication at Wisconsin Lutheran College since its earliest days. He and his wife are blessed with four grown children and seven grandchildren.

Pastor Heins brings to CHARIS a long and varied experience in congregational life. He has come to know many church leaders and thinkers both inside and outside the WELS. He is at home in the academic world. He has demonstrated the willingness to pioneer new ideas, and he has answered in an evangelical way the criticism that new ideas invariably provoke.

We wish Pastor Heins God’s blessings as he embarks on this new phase of his service in the kingdom.