A Statement Regarding Non-WELS Students in the College’s Choirs

Written by Dr. Mark Braun, Edited by Dr. John E. Bauer

In response to inquiries regarding the WLC’s practice of including non-WELS students in its choirs, this statement was written in December 2002 to provide a rationale for the College’s practice within the context of the WELS’ doctrinal position on church fellowship.

Approximately 75% of the College’s students are members of WELS or ELS congregations. Another 15% are members of other Lutheran churches, and the remaining students belong to non-Lutheran churches. We praise God for this blessing! The presence of non-WELS and non-Lutheran students on our campus provides us with many opportunities to testify to our faith and to help them grow in their commitment to Jesus and in their desire to serve Him.

In the 1950s, when the Wisconsin Synod in its great debate with the LCMS was compelled to examine and delineate its fellowship principles more precisely, our synodical fathers recognized the distinction between those who are weak in their understanding of Scripture and willing to receive further instruction, and those who refuse to accept further scriptural testimony but cling to unbiblical beliefs and practices. The uniquely WELS nomenclature of weak brother and persistent errorist, though unfamiliar to many other Christians, accurately reflects Romans 16:17-18. God calls on us to separate from those who habitually cause divisions and put obstacles in our way that are contrary to the teaching we have learned.

Significantly, the “Essay on Church Fellowship” in the WELS Doctrinal Statements of 1970 never mentions one’s denominational membership as the only or even the primary criterion for determining whether someone is a weak brother or a persistent errorist. The essay proceeds from the Una Sancta to expressions of fellowship to weakness of faith to persistence in error. The statement rightly recognizes that “this Spirit-wrought faith at the same time unites us in an intimate bond with all other believers” (p. 16, emphasis ours), and that the faith of Christians is “marked by many imperfections, either in the grasp and understanding of Scriptural truths, or in the matter of turning these truths to full account in their lives. We are all weak in one way or another” (p.32, emphasis ours). Today many Christians do not know what their church teaches, or if they do, they remain willing to listen to what Scripture says. They may even be in agreement with us, though their denominational label differs from our own. The essay does not say that membership in another church body is sufficient evidence by itself of being a persistent errorist. Instead, it says, “We can no longer recognize and treat as Christian brethren those who in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error in doctrine or practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it” (p.42, emphasis ours).

The question, then, of whether or not to include non-WELS students in the College’s choirs is somewhat misplaced. The real question is, “Do we permit persistent errorists to join with us in worship and praise to God in the choir?” The answer to this question is “No.”

All of our students are required to complete at least 12 credits of theology. These include courses in biblical studies, practical Christian living, Lutheran doctrine, comparative Christian and non-Christian doctrine, and church history. Some non-WELS students are obviously committed to the particular doctrinal stands of their church bodies and are unwilling to examine or change their stance even when confronted with Scriptural testimony in our classes. But in our experience, the large majority of non-WELS students are not committed members of their church bodies. By enrolling in our
college, aware of our doctrinal position, they demonstrate their willingness to learn and submit to the theological viewpoints that Wisconsin Lutheran College professes. Some non-WELS students even give more biblical, and more Lutheran, testimonies of their faith than some of our lifelong WELS students.

If a student does not know the teachings of our church body, we believe our mission as a college and as a church body is to unfold the Scriptures to them, in the classroom and in other settings, and to involve them in appropriate spiritual elements of our campus life. Assuming that such a student is a weak fellow Christian and not a persistent errorist, we follow the practical implications expressed in the essay on fellowship: “Weakness of faith is not in itself a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an encouragement for practicing church fellowship more vigorously to help one another overcome our weakness of faith.” (In precept and example Scripture abounds with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak” (Doctrinal Statements, p.33, emphasis ours).

It is not always easy to determine whether a person is a weak fellow Christian or a persistent errorist. We face the same challenge that our congregations and our area Lutheran high schools face when we meet and seek to serve those who do not belong to the WELS. It would be uncharitable for us to assume that all members of other church bodies are persistent errorists, particularly when their actions reveal that they are willing, even eager, to learn more about what we believe. Evangelical practice requires us to recognize other factors besides the denominational membership of such people.

It is our belief that the College has an obligation, in a pastoral and evangelical way, to determine as best we can whether a non-WELS student acts out of weakness of faith or in persistent error. Evangelical practice means we examine each situation individually. We do not accept what may be considered a “one size fits all” approach in which a category of students is treated in the same way one might treat a visitor to a congregation. Such an approach runs the risk of mechanical and legalistic application. Mission prospects and non-WELS students do not come with the same level of understanding.

We believe our practice of including non-WELS students in our choirs is consistent with our Synod’s Doctrinal Statements so long as these students do not act in persistent error. Believing that weakness of faith is not in-and-of-itself sufficient to exclude them from such fellowship, WLC has carefully and deliberately decided to welcome weak brothers and sisters in the faith to sing in the College’s choirs as a continuation of our ministry to them. We seek the understanding and support of our fellow WELS members as we share the truth of the Gospel with our students through the ministry of Wisconsin Lutheran College.

Your Comments Are Invited

Applications and acceptable practices of the doctrine of church fellowship continue to be problematic for many pastors, teachers, and lay leaders.

CHARIS invites letters and papers which address any aspect of this subject from any interested reader. Future issues of the journal will attempt to lay out the issue in greater detail by providing a forum for discussion.

Submissions should be sent to the editor.
Fellowship

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