Dialogue

This is a regular feature in which we share correspondence from our readers in order to extend the discussion created by articles in previous issues of CHARIS. Letters are generally reprinted in their entirety, as is. However, personal or extraneous material is usually excised. The editor reserves the right to provide a response to any letter when providing a balanced perspective calls for it. Readers are invited to write or e-mail comments and reactions to the editor. Any correspondence addressed to the editor may be included in Dialogue at the discretion of the editor without seeking permission of the writer.

I would like to hope that Prof. Hartwig's article on hermeneutics in the Fall 2004 issue of Charis will be a wake up call. Isn't it true that many, if not most of our differences stem from a difference in hermeneutics? Are we perhaps too casual in thinking that we have it right? Should we perhaps do some serious, critical thinking about the way we approach, interpret, apply the inspired Scriptures which the Lord has entrusted to us?

H. Johne
Fife Lake, MI

To whom is concern:

I was recently given a flyer from Wisconsin Lutheran College and was in total disbelief. I may be wrong but the speaker being introduced is a Baptist teacher, maybe he has denounced his background but there is no mention of this. If I'm correct in this reference why would you (or us) if we are in fellowship invite a person that denies real presents in the Lord's Supper, is a millenarian, does believe in Infant baptism, and doesn't believe that we are lost and condemned sinner saved by Grace, not by living a love your neighbor good person salvation, or the importance of Male leadership in family and Church.

I personally would not recommend this as a synod recommended or suggested seminar. I personally have been to many motivational seminars for my business/livelihood but not for spiritual renewal. I go to Bible classes for spiritual renewal.

I feel our direction is to go out and teach using the scripture for our backbone not the words of a non confessing man, that is not using the Word for his guild. How do I handle bible passages such as Matt:7:15, 1st John 4:1, Rom 16:17, and Cor:14-18 and many more.

This topic of fellowship is near to me, being a new WELS member (29) years not from a family that was historically WELS. When I was 9-10 years old my folks left the local Missouri church because of unaccepted practices. So my up bringing was across the kitchen table by my father who has no passed on and gave me his personal set of Luther Works, all 52 vol.. So my fellowship and association has been very cautious. From 1970-1976 I was a member of the LCR congregation and spent many day of discussion on WELS be for joining liberal group compared to my background.

So now it appears to me that you are encouraging a very poor fellowship practice. Please watch for the devil in sheep's clothe. There are a lot of good ideas out there but living by example is the best one.
Dialogue

Main reason the young are not in church is that the parents are not here now or in there past. I hope to see a reply to this or better yet to the whole synod of how we could allow such a blather despise of scriptural guidance.

Thank You For Your Time

Dave Lange

Greetings in Christ!

I just wanted to drop you a brief note about the upcoming “Church Door” symposium at WLC, the end of February/ beginning of March 2005.

I noted from the announcement in Charis journal that the speaker will be Reggie McNeal. First, I want to thank Charis for including this notice as a general invitation to attend. Thank you for doing this. I think back to our conversation at the synod convention in summer of 2003, and I appreciate Charis providing information and invitations to the entire membership of WELS.

I must confess that inviting non-WELS presenters makes me somewhat uncomfortable. This is no doubt because of the “baggage” I bring with me as a former member of a very liberal Lutheran church body. I will probably continue to struggle with that “baggage” for a long time, so I will probably be more “touchy” on the subject of non-WELS presenters than others might be. I trust my brothers at Charis, and I trust that you will continue to present Charis events in a way that is fully in keeping with the scriptural principles of church fellowship.

May God bless you and all at WLC with a blessed and “merry” Christmas in the Christ-Child.

Rev. Guy Purdue
Freeland, MI

Dear Dr. Bauer,

I recently received your pamphlet promoting the symposium you will be sponsoring in February. I was very surprised to see that a Baptist man will be your keynote speaker. I find it difficult to see how this can be viewed as being consistent with the Scriptural principles of fellowship. I assume from your schedule that you are trying to have the speaker make his presentation outside the framework of fellowship. You are having the worship service in one place and the presentation in another. However, at the time he makes his presentation, this speaker is going to be teaching and leading those who are present in a discussion of spiritual topics. I would imagine that he is going to be making reference to Scripture and talking about the great commission that our Savior has given us. While we might benefit from what the man has to say by reading his lectures or writings, it is a very different thing when he is there in person.

The Apostle Paul says, “Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.” (Galatians 6:6) I assume that you are paying the man to make his
presentation. By extending an invitation to him and supporting him in a personal way, you are indicating that you are one with him. It is striking that the phrase “share all things” in the above passage is from the same root as the word for fellowship. Professor Carl Lawrenz always stressed that the student/teacher relationship is a very intimate expression of fellowship. I do not see how you could want to have any presentation of this kind outside the framework of fellowship. Surely there is someone from your own fellowship who could make such a presentation, even if he were to draw some on the work of Christians outside of our fellowship. To quote from a man’s work is a very different thing than having him make a presentation in person.

The Lord also says to us through Paul, “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned! Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.” (Romans 16:17-18) This Baptist man openly takes a stand on the Sacraments that is different than our own. How can we pretend that these differences do not exist? Isn’t that what we would be doing by having this man make a presentation at a symposium sponsored by Lutheran Christians? How can we say that we are “keeping away from” one who takes a public stand contrary to ours when we invite him to lead us in a discussion of spiritual things? I do not understand why you would propose such a thing. Have you talked this over with your father, your earthly one and your heavenly Father?

As this symposium is reported in the newspapers and by the media otherwise, won’t the impression be given that we make the same confession as this man, and that whatever differences we have in teaching are not that important? I don’t see how it can be avoided. Is that not a slap in the face of our Savior who has given us the Word and Sacraments? My daughter and son-in-law are graduates of WLC and we are grateful for the Christian education they received there. It certainly seemed as though the spiritual level of both faculty and students was truly good and pleasing to God. However, there have been things that I have found difficult to understand.

I was once given a Good Friday service folder for services at your chapel. It listed a Baptist young lady as one of the readers and leaders for the service on the campus. How could this be justified in the light of what our Lord teaches us concerning Christian fellowship and the place of women in the church?

My son-in-law gave me a copy of the ‘Charis’ magazine when we were together this past summer. It had an article from one of your past symposiums on the place of women in the church. It was most difficult to understand just what the author was saying. Was she expressing opposition to our Scriptural position on the place of women in the church or just saying that we are not trying hard enough to use the gifts God has given to our women? Clarity was lacking. Many of our congregations seem to be working hard to make full use of the gifts and talents the Lord has given to our women.

I was born and raised in the Missouri Synod and was a member of that synod until the day of my ordination as a Wisconsin Synod pastor. That was just a year before the separation of fellowship took place. I have followed what has happened in the synod of my youth as carefully as I can over the years. I deeply regret that seemingly small changes have led to greater and greater compromises where the clear Word of God is concerned. I would not like to see that happen in our synod. If some do not agree with our teachings, there are liberal Lutheran churches and different evangelical churches that they can join. They should not feel that they have some kind of calling to try to lead the Wisconsin Synod into some new age. Why add another liberal church body to the great number out there already? What we need is a Lutheran body that seeks to be faithful to the Word of God in every possible way. We need to keep striving for that. Lord, help us.
I urge you to consider changing the speaker for your symposium. We need to continue to work with those of our own fellowship to find the best ways to reach out with the Gospel in our age.

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Keith Haag

Dear Dr. Bauer:

I have recently received a pamphlet in the mail informing me of the Charis Institute’s 2nd Annual Symposium about Leading the Church in a Post Modern World. I am very concerned that the keynote speaker is Dr. Reggie McNeal, a leader in a heterodox church body.

I am only a simple layman but I am armed with Scripture. It is simply not possible to reconcile having Dr. McNeal come into a WELS college to give advice on church leadership with Romans 16:17.

I suppose one could always use some technicality to justify why this is not a violation of the Scriptural principles of fellowship. One could say that he is not presenting any doctrinal issues or we are not worshiping with him. These are ways of avoiding the clear command of Scripture to mark and avoid.

By inviting Dr. McNeal into our midst we are placing a de facto stamp of approval on his positions, not only on secular matters but also on religious matters. It is one thing to have a member of a heterodox body speak to the students and faculty about certain principles of bookkeeping and accounting. It is another matter to have an outside member give us advice on how to prepare our church for the challenges of the post-modern world.

My wife and I are currently raising our granddaughter. We are going to be sending her to Winnebago Lutheran Academy when she reaches that age. I would like her to go to a WELS college where she can receive instruction in God’s Word during those formative college years. But I am having increasing doubts about sending her to WLC when I see these activities being promoted. I would rather send her to a secular college where she will be on her guard to fend off the false teachings of the world.

If I send her to WLC her guard will be down. She will assume that the presentations given there will have the stamp of approval of the faculty, administration, and the Synod. This will make her very vulnerable to the teachings of someone like Martin Marty or Dr. McNeal. Perhaps we out here in the hinterland are not as sophisticated as the scholars at WLC. Perhaps we do not understand academic freedom in the same way that the professors and learned doctors at the college do. But we do understand bringing our children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. We do understand the importance of maintaining the clear teachings of Scripture. Our Synod may not have the numbers that larger churches do, but we do have the truth and it is more important to have the truth than it is to have numbers.

Church history is littered with synods and denominations that have gone down the path of seeking numbers at the expense of sound doctrine. Let us preach the Word and not worry about getting some outside source from some heterodox church to tell us how to do it.
Dialogue

Reading this pamphlet announcing Dr. McNeal’s presentation at Wisconsin Lutheran College was like a fire bell in the night. If these types of presentation continue and even increase I fear for the future of our Synod.

Sincerely,

Allen Krause

NOTE: A thoughtful response was provided by Dr. Bauer to each of those who wrote letters about Dr. Reggie McNeal’s presence on campus. Rather than reprint each specific letter, the following generic response is provided which addresses the substance of the concern.

Thank you for your letter expressing concern about Dr. Reggie McNeal’s speaking at the upcoming Church Door Symposium. I understand your concern, but must respectfully disagree with your conclusion that his speaking somehow represents a violation of Romans 16:17 and our Synod’s Doctrine of Church Fellowship. With this letter I hope to explain why I disagree with you and, in submission to God and His Word, seek to arrive at a shared understanding of the Scriptures with you on this matter.

I first of all want to assure you that careful thought was given to inviting Dr. McNeal. In planning the symposium, I sought the advice of a number of our Synod leaders regarding who they would most want to hear speak on the general topic of leading the church into a new century. In fact, it was their encouragement that prompted me to contact Dr. McNeal. Since inviting him, I have had numerous other pastors and lay leaders express their excitement about his coming. His books, particularly his most recent volume, The Present Future, appear to be widely read by our WELS clergy.

The issue of having non-WELS speakers has been greatly studied and argued about in recent years. Admittedly, WLC has been something of a lightning rod in this area. But I can assure you that it is because we believe that in Christian freedom we not only can support such guest speakers, but also believe that it is the right thing to do in order to accomplish our Christian education objectives. However, to help put your mind at ease, permit me to share the thoughts of some of our respected church leaders on the subject.

On April 6, 1999, the Conference of Presidents of the WELS passed the following resolution:

"Presentations and discussions about secular and/or religious matters which take place in schools, churches, conferences, commissions and parasyndical organizations of our fellowship, or similar events, can take place outside the framework of fellowship. When speakers and presenters are not of our fellowship they MUST be conducted outside the framework of fellowship."

This statement reflects the theses on Church Fellowship in the Doctrinal Statements of 1970, which I regard as a correct explanation and application of the biblical passages that address church fellowship. The opening thesis describes church fellowship as “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.” It is possible, however, and in some contexts it may be necessary to listen to or speak with a person or persons not united with us in doctrine – to hear and evaluate their viewpoint more fully, to debate that viewpoint, or to witness to them of our own beliefs.

The book by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Professor John Brug, Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth, grants this possibility:

"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 that might create undarstability, 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…. The same principles apply to academic associations, such as
church history or archaeological societies” (pp. 155-156).

The practice of inviting guest speakers has a long history at WLC and a policy governing such activities was carefully
and thoughtfully developed. At least one past Seminary president was on the WLC Board of Regents when it approved
the College’s policy and he played an active role in its development.

“Guest artists and scholars from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives shall be sought by Wisconsin
Lutheran College each year to offer vantages and viewpoints in various forums and formats to challenge and
provoke intellectual and spiritual growth among faculty and students. Consistent with its philosophy and mission
as a liberal arts college, WLC promotes such experiences to help its student mature in Christian discernment, to
demonstrate how the Word of God speaks to life’s issues, to appreciate truth and beauty, and to grow in their
capacity to make informed value judgments.”

With the guidance and spiritual advice of its pastor and Seminary president members, the WLC Board of Regents
signed and approved the chartering documents for The CHARIS Institute, the purpose of which includes hosting
symposia at which non-WELS speakers could speak.

The practice of inviting non-WELS speakers has also been commonplace among other organizations and agencies of the
WELS. A few examples will make the point:

- Christian Life Resources, supported by its current and past board members has invited such non-WELS
  speakers as C. E. verret Koop, Charleton Heston, Cal Thomas, and others to be keynote speakers for
  WELS Lutherans for Life conventions.
- The WELS Commission on Worship planned and hosted the WELS National Conference on Worship,
  Music, and the Arts, and invited the likes of LCMS Professor Wayne Schmidt (1995), LCMS Pastor
  Harold Senkbeil (1997), and numerous non-WELS speakers and sectional leaders at the 1999, 2001,
  and 2003 conferences.
- Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary has for many years invited non-WELS, non-Lutheran, and even non-
  Christian speakers. These include Anson Rainey, Menachen Mansoor, Robert Kolb, Gleason Archer, Basil
  Jackson, and many others.

I should also mention that the audience of the Church Door Symposium is primarily pastors, professors, teachers, and
lay leaders. In other words, the audience is comprised of those who are more likely to be deeply involved in congregational
ministries. These are not the weak in faith. To be sure, WLC students and faculty will also be in attendance.

However, evaluating what Dr. McNeal has to say along side their professors promotes exactly the kind of outcomes for
our students that are described in our “Guest Artist and Scholar” policy. Furthermore, the context of Dr. McNeal’s
presentations will be established before and after he speaks. You will notice that the presentations will be followed by a
panel discussion led by a number of our WELS leaders.

At the heart of the issue seems to be an assumption on your part that interacting with individuals on matters of mutual
concern to Christ’s Church on earth (i.e., common to all the various tribes of Christianity), is a violation of church
fellowship. I hope I have shown that such is not the case. A s today’s church, and the WELS in particular, seeks to
find ways to share the Gospel with a lost generation, the enemy is Satan, the world, and our own flesh – not other
Christians from whom we might learn something.

We also need to be reminded that the physical manifestation of the Church that we call the Wisconsin Evangelical
Lutheran Synod is a man-made and imperfect organization of human beings. How it conducts its business, carries out
its ministries, organizes and funds itself – these are all human endeavors. They are not God-ordained. Instead, we have
great freedom in the Gospel to utilize our human reason to plan, organize, manage, build, develop programs, compose music, experiment with outreach strategies, and a host of other human activities—all humanly conceived in response to the Great Commission.

This Synod has been phenomenally blessed for more than 150 years. It is a very special group of people. But its congregations have shown in many ways to lack the leadership, the zeal, the passion, and—in many cases—the expertise and wherewithal, to extend themselves to an unbelieving world. We were very successful at providing a home for 19th-Century German immigrants. We've been very good at perpetuating that white Western European religious culture with the descendents of those immigrants. But we have been pretty poor at sharing the Gospel with those from culturally, ethnically and racially diverse backgrounds. We have not been very successful at integrating ourselves into metropolitan communities. We haven't been very successful in reaching a younger generation that, while spiritual, is not religious. And many of our long cherished institutions (e.g., Lutheran elementary schools, Sunday schools) are showing their inability to adapt to a changing culture that affects even our own members. If Reggie McNeal or others of different denominational stripes can share some insights and perspectives on how the human association of Christians called the WELS can better heed Christ's command, then we should welcome them. If we can learn how to overcome some of the obvious limitations we face as a synod by seeking the advice of others with the expertise we lack, then we should take from them whatever is useful and edifying for the church.

No, I don't agree with your assertion that having Dr. McNeal is a violation of Romans 16 or our synod's Doctrine of Church Fellowship. That doesn't mean that your concerns are without merit. Please believe me when I say that I weigh them very seriously. Any time a brother or sister in faith raises a question of doctrine or practice with me, it is a matter of concern. But I hope also that in giving voice to your concern, you can also accept some instruction on the matter. And while I may not have completely erased your concerns, I hope and pray that I have at least given you something to reflect on, and perhaps pursue further in your own study of God's Word or in your conversations with your pastor.

Thank you again for sharing your concerns. I greatly appreciate the fact that you took the time to write to me.

Your brother in Christ,

John E. Bauer, Ph.D.,
Executive Director, CHARIS