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A History of the CLC and Differences Between CLC and Other Synods

The Church of the Lutheran Confession (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. As that association of formerly conservative Lutheran church bodies in North America was drawing its last breath, the CLC was just becoming a church body.

The CLC emerged from three of the former member churches of the Synodical Conference: primarily from the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), but also from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS). The Synodical Conference had originally been formed on the basis of full agreement in doctrine and practice on the part of the member churches; it broke apart when that basis and the biblical doctrine of church fellowship on which it rested was no longer fully practiced by the member churches.

Members of the CLC are eager to testify to the truths that had been held by the Synodical Conference in the days when it had been faithful to the doctrines of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, as found in the Book of Concord of 1580; thus the name that was chosen: Church of the Lutheran Confession.

This desire is also attested by the CLC's adopting the **Brief Statement of 1932** as one of the confessional writings cited in its constitution. Thus the CLC confesses: "In our teaching and preaching we rely wholly upon the Bible, the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. We regard this Book of Books as the Word of God, verbally inspired and wholly without error as written by holy men of God. We consider our mission to be that of communicating the words and message of this Book to those who will hear them; and we know of no other divine source of true doctrine and instruction in the way of salvation and in God-pleasing living."

Further: "We therefore reject as sacrilegious and destructive every effort by which the intellect or science of man would modify or set aside a single inspired word. We deplore the widespread apostasy...which reduces the Bible to the status of a human document containing errors and myths."

In the above-mentioned doctrine of the Scriptures the CLC differs widely from the most liberal branches of general Lutheranism, namely those Lutheran churches found in European nations and, in the United States, that Lutheran church body identifying itself, since 1988, as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The ELCA is admittedly not agreed in doctrine among the church bodies which formed it through merger. Even its most conservative wing would not accept the high view of the Scriptures as verbally inspired and wholly without error, which is unashamedly taught in the CLC.

As the ELCA is the most liberal of the Lutheran church bodies in the United States, so the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) may be regarded as the moderate, more middle-of-the-road, wing of American Lutheranism. It does not as yet go so far, for

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example, as the ELCA in permitting women to serve as parish pastors (although a poll of LCMS pastors reported that more than 1,000 of them had no objection to women clergy), yet it has changed its former position (as held by earlier leaders C.F.W. Walther and F. Pieper) and now permits women to vote and hold office in the church. This is one illustration of the present-day attitude of the LCMS toward the inviolability of Scripture. The LCMS espouses the notion that the words of St. Paul regarding women in the church were culturally-affected and are no longer applicable in today's society. The CLC, on the other hand, holds that St. Paul, writing words which were verbally inspired and inerrant, was expressing the eternal will of God.

Another illustration of this difference can be seen in the doctrine of the Church, particularly in reference to church fellowship. Because we of the CLC deplore any attempt to modify or set aside a single inspired word of Scripture, we also wish to be obedient to those words of God which instruct regarding the Church and the practice of fellowship. We firmly believe that the Church consists of all who, by God's mercy and according to His own purpose and grace, were from eternity ordained unto eternal life, and that the factor uniting the Church is "the one true faith." Faith cannot be seen by human eyes, and therefore the very existence of the Church is an article of faith. Since the word of God promises it, we believe that where the Gospel in word and sacrament is in use there true believers are present.

In the exercise of fellowship in worship (praying together) and joint church work, we cannot recognize our brethren by the faith in their hearts, which is not visible to us. Instead, by the grace of God and in accordance with His instruction, we are permitted to exercise fellowship only with those who in their confession and life bow to the rule of the divine word of God. Because Christ Himself urged: "**Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you**"; and because the Holy Spirit inspired St. Paul to write: "**Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment**" - we know in faith that it is the divine will that Christians are to be perfectly united in doctrine and practice, and that they are not to be indifferent in this matter (perhaps "agreeing to disagree agreeably") but are to seek agreement on the basis of God's word. Where there is such unity in doctrine and practice there is to be the practice of fellowship in all its phases; where there is not such unity, God's word in Romans 16:17 sets forth the God-pleasing refusal of the practice of fellowship: "**Now I beseech you, brethren, mark (keep on taking note of) them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.**"

The CLC, accordingly, upholds the following in the **Brief Statement of 1932**: "**Since God ordained that His Word only, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church (1 Pet. 4:11; John 8:31,32; 1 Tim. 6:3,4) all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them (Rom. 16:17). We repudiate unionism, that is, church-fellowship with adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church (Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9,10), and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely (2 Tim. 2:17-21). ... The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name**

nor by its outward acceptance and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is **actually** taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications."

In place of the above, which was once held by the LCMS, that church body now practices what they term "levels of fellowship" according to which fellowship may be practiced among Christians of varying confessions under certain circumstances: such as open communion, ecumenical services and the like.

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) are in fellowship with each other, though not completely agreed on the involvement of admonition in the process of terminating fellowship on their part with a church body which has "become infected with error". Both bodies, however, do maintain that it is necessary to make the judgment ("come to the conviction") that "admonition is of no further avail" before termination of fellowship can take place. The CLC, on the other hand, holds that such a subjective judgment regarding the further results of admonition is not only impossible, because only God can read human hearts, but also unnecessary; for Rom. 16:17 says only that when it has been ascertained that an individual or a church body is causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of Holy Scripture, the directive to avoid is as binding as any word addressed to us by our Savior God in Holy Scripture. The apostle's preemptory "**avoid!**" is the voice of the Good Shepherd Himself, as He lovingly protects His sheep and lambs from the deception of error and as He graciously gives warning to the false teacher. ... We reject any interpretation of Rom. 16:17-18 which, in the name of Christian love, would make the avoiding of causers of divisions and offenses contingent upon the subjective judgment that admonition is of no further avail and that an impasse has been reached.

It might be felt that the CLC exists merely to testify **against** the errors of others. The truth is that the CLC is, in fact, **for** something very precious, namely the **full and complete revelation** of God's word to the world of sinners, among whom we include ourselves. Surely, then, the CLC is an **evangelical** church, in the full sense of the term; our most important mission is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news that God has redeemed the whole world and has declared it righteous through the death and bodily resurrection of the God-Man, Jesus Christ; and that believers in Him will inherit everlasting life in heaven.

As part of its mission, the CLC is deeply interested and involved in Christian education. Christian day schools, taught by professionally trained teachers, are operated by more than one-fourth of its congregations. The CLC also educates young people for leadership as dedicated lay members, Christian day-school teachers, or pastors, at its Immanuel Lutheran College in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. The college has three departments: high school, liberal arts college, and theological seminary. There are four-year programs leading to a bachelor's degree in elementary education or pre-theological studies, and a two-year general studies program granting an ^{associate} degree.

Member congregations of the CLC are located in 23 states, and the church body presently supports missions in 18 U.S. cities. While not in fellowship with any other U.S. Lutheran body, the CLC has fellowship with ^{three} ~~two~~ overseas church bodies it is helping to support in India and Nigeria, and is also beginning missions ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ Thailand and Canada.

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The CLC has three official publications: **Ministry by Mail, Lutheran Spokesman, and Journal of Theology.**

Prof. John Lau
07/09/95