

Immanuel Lutheran College
Eau Claire, Wisconsin
February 28, 1989

EXEGETICAL DIFFERENCES ON ROMANS 16:17-18
BETWEEN THE WELS/ELS AND THE CLC

Introduction

Representatives of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) met at Eau Claire, Wisconsin, on January 13 and 14, 1988, to consider the question whether or not differences still existed between the two bodies on the doctrine of church fellowship, particularly on that aspect of church fellowship which deals with the termination of fellowship with errorists. The agenda and time of meeting had been previously arranged by the presidents of the WELS and the CLC. Papers on Romans 16:17-18 and on 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14-15 were delivered by representatives of the WELS and of the CLC. During the two days pointed questions were asked of the essayists, and frank discussion took place among the participants. It was the consensus of the group that special attention would have to be given to the question of what role admonition should play in the termination of fellowship with another church body. It was agreed that the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) should be invited to future meetings and that the presidents of the three bodies should arrange a time and agenda for the next meeting.

In accord with arrangements made by the synodical presidents, a meeting between the WELS, ELS, and CLC took place at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on February 1 and 2, 1989. A member of the WELS, representing the WELS and the ELS, read a paper on "The Role of Admonition in the Area of Termination of Church Fellowship between Church Bodies." A member of the CLC read a paper entitled "A CLC Presentation concerning Fellowship, Admonition, Separation." Again, pointed questions were asked and frank discussion took place. Several participants expressed concern about what seemed to be a difference between the WELS/ELS exegesis of Romans 16:17-18 and that of the CLC, a difference involving particularly the Greek word skopein in that passage. Summary statements, prepared by the representatives of the individual synods, were presented at a joint session on the second day and briefly discussed. It was agreed that these statements should be treated as in-house documents and not published. It was furthermore agreed that the WELS/ELS and the CLC prepare theses and antitheses on the question of the role of admonition in the termination of fellowship between church bodies, and that these statements be presented at a joint meeting to be arranged by the synodical presidents.

2430

The representatives of the CLC at the 1988 and 1989 meetings have had growing concerns about the exegesis of Romans 16:17-18 as presented by the WELS and endorsed also by the ELS. Moreover, some representatives of the WELS

and of the ELS have questioned the validity of certain points in the CLC exegesis of this passage. The undersigned, with the knowledge and consent of the chairman of the CLC Board of Doctrine and the president of the CLC, has prepared this study in an attempt to define more clearly what the exegetical differences are. He has, moreover, added critiques on the two positions as he understands them. Finally, he has appended a discussion of the doctrinal implications of these exegetical differences.

I. The WELS/ELS Position on Romans 16:17-18 and the Role of Admonition

A. A Summary of the WELS/ELS Exegesis

The WELS/ELS representatives have expressed concern over what they have come to understand as the position of the CLC on Romans 16:17-18. After hearing the CLC paper on this passage and after considering our responses to their questions on this paper, some of them have come to feel that the CLC position might "not leave full opportunity for the loving activity of admonition before termination. . . . Some have felt that so close an association may have been drawn [by the CLC] between 'marking' and 'avoiding' as to make those two activities almost synonymous and thus in lock-step fashion to require that as soon as any aberration in doctrine or practice is detected, there must be an immediate severance of fellowship" ("The Role of Admonition" 9).

In order to find room for fraternal admonition and a response thereto in the application of Romans 16:17-18, the WELS/ELS have found in the skopein of that passage more than a mere observing or watching. They recognize that skopein according to its inherent meaning does not require admonition; they affirm, moreover, that Paul in Romans 16:17-18 "does not specifically and directly enjoin admonition" ("The Role of Admonition" 14). How, then, can they defend their insistence upon a role for admonition in the application of Romans 16:17-18? They state that while skopein does not in itself require admonition, "admonition is required by the situation that is seen or observed" ("The Role of Admonition" 11-12); and they defend their inclusion of admonition in the "observing" of Romans 16:17-18 by an appeal to other New Testament contexts in which the verb skopein occurs--passages in which skopein manifests what they refer to as a "positive slant."

What are some of the passages in which such a "positive slant" is found? They cite Philippians 3:7, in which Paul urges his readers to "take note of [skopeite] those who live according to the pattern we gave you" and follow their good example. They cite Galatians 6:1, where Paul admonishes: "Watch [skopōn] yourself, lest you also be tempted"--this "watching" involving more than "a mere detached, passive observing of oneself." And they cite Philippians 2:4, in which Paul cautions his readers "not to look out [skopountes] only for your own things, but also for the things of others." On the basis of this last passage, they affirm: "Hence skopein does permit the possibility of the 'watching' being for the benefit of others. To make that point relevant to the topic currently under discussion, we would observe that skopein allows the activity of admonition, so beneficial to the ones observed" ("The Role of Admonition" 10-11).

To summarize, the WELS/ELS justify including admonition in the application of Romans 16:17-18 on the basis of these two considerations: 1) such admonition is a proper and necessary response of Christian love over towards those with whom one has been in fellowship; and 2) such positive actions as admonition can be found in other New Testament passages in which the verb skopein occurs.

The WELS/ELS exegesis of Romans 16:17-18 points also to the difference in form between the skopein and the ekklinete ("avoid") of this passage. After the introductory parakalo, Paul employs a complementary infinitive, skopein, but then switches to an imperative, ekklinete. This change in construction, the WELS/ELS paper suggests, is intentional and significant. For the imperative "avoid" is thereby made grammatically parallel to the repeated imperative "greet" (aspasasthe) found in verses 1 to 16 of this chapter of Romans. (This parallel would be even more evident if we accepted the well-attested variant reading ekklinete in verse 17. Thus the "greet" and the "avoid" would both be aorist imperative in form.)

The foregoing, according to the WELS/ELS paper, suggests the following scenario in carrying out the activity of skopein over toward brethren who have strayed into error: In Christian love we admonish them. If they accept that admonition, then it becomes evident that we are dealing, not with false teachers, but with weak brethren, and we can continue to "greet" them (verses 1-16). But (the Greek particle de is taken adversatively) if there is an adherence to error and a defense of it in spite of such admonition, then it becomes evident that we are dealing with those who are causing divisions and offenses, and we must instead "avoid" them.

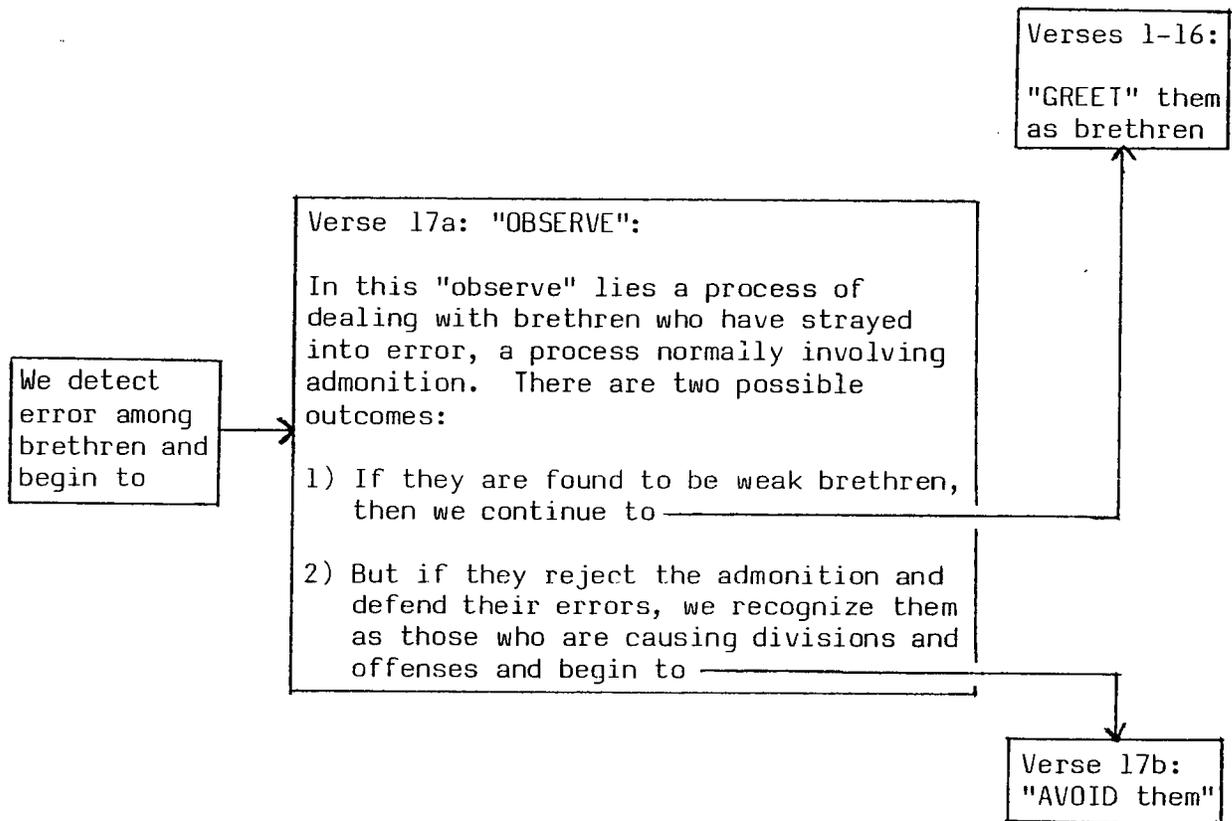
The WELS/ELS exegesis of Romans 16:17-18 urges, moreover, that we note Paul's use of the present tense in the participle poiountas ("are causing"). The choice of a linear tense form indicates that their adherence to error is ongoing. "Their problem is not a lack of information, or an unfortunate choice of wording, or a chance misstep. They remain committed to an unscriptural position. That state of affairs calls for decisive action" ("The Role of Admonition" 15). The decisive action spoken of is a termination of fellowship in all its aspects.

The undersigned read the following statement to the WELS/ELS representatives and asked them whether it was a fair description of their understanding of the skopein in Romans 16:17:

skopein seems to be viewed by the WELS/ELS as an observing process of longer or shorter duration during which one is dealing with an errorist, a process whose progress and termination will depend on individual circumstances, a process that has in view both the welfare of the observer and the welfare of the observed, a process that normally involves a course of admonition, a process that continues until there is either a correction of the situation, or a determination of persistence in error or of manifest impenitence.

There were no objections to this description of their position, although we realize that it may have been difficult for them to evaluate the above statement after only one hearing.

Hopefully, we are not misrepresenting the WELS/ELS exegetical position or making a caricature of it when we display it graphically as follows:



B. A Critique of the WELS/ELS Exegesis

The CLC representatives repeatedly urged the WELS/ELS representatives to note the direct object of the verb skopein. That direct object is "those who are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine." We therefore deem it inappropriate for the WELS/ELS to apply the skopein of Romans 16:17 to to the "observing" of brethren who may have strayed into error. We do not jump right away to Romans 16:17 in our dealing with such brethren. Rather, we will go to them to find out whether they simply misspoke or whether we misunderstood them. If neither of these is the case, we will bring Scripture to bear on the situation in an attempt to show them what God says on the matter, even as the Bible urges us to "convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2). So long as they are willing to be instructed in the Word and do not make propaganda for their error, we will continue to deal with them as weak brethren. Only if they take a stand against the Word, promote error, and thereby cause divisions and offenses in Christ's church-- only then will we apply Romans 16:17-18 to the situation. In that passage Paul urges us throughout our lifetime to keep on watching out (skopein) for those who are causing divisions and offenses, and now we recognize that these erstwhile brethren fit into that category. They have themselves already broken the fellowship, and our avoiding them follows promptly, lest their errors work havoc among the simple.

The point made in the previous paragraph is worth repeating: We deem it inappropriate for the WELS/ELS to move at once to the skopein of Romans 16:17 when they suspect that brethren may have strayed into error. This could immediately inject a note of suspicion into our dealings with those who may merely have misspoken or who may be no more than weak brethren in need of our loving correction.

We must comment, furthermore, on the treatment of skopein by the WELS/ELS in their exegesis. They have looked for passages in which skopein gains what they call a "positive slant," including the admonishing of brethren. But none of the passages which they cite has to do with false teachers, with those who are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine. We affirm that it is a wrong exegetical procedure to take truths from such passages, load these truths on the back of skopein, and then transport them into Romans 16:17-18 via this word. James Barr in his seminal work, The Semantics of Biblical Language, speaks about this matter of hermeneutics. He affirms: "The error that arises, when the 'meaning' of a word (understood as the total series of relations in which it is used in the literature) is read into a particular case as its sense and implication there, may be called 'illegitimate totality transfer'; and he warns against "obscuring the value of a word in a context by imposing upon it the totality of its uses" ([London: Oxford University Press, c1961] 218-219).

Now we have nothing against word studies on the usage of a particular word in the Old or New Testaments. We appreciate, for example, the marvelous insights which Prof. P. Peters has given us in his study of the usage of the Old Testament covenant term chesed. Nor would we have any objection to developing a theology of Christian watchfulness--a theology which would include watchfulness for oneself, watchfulness for one's brethren, watchfulness for false teachers, etc. But we believe that it is a wrong exegetical procedure to inject the portions of that theology which deal with weak brethren into a passage which is cautioning Christians to watch out for false teachers.

Romans 16:17-18 does indeed speak about watchfulness, but the watchfulness here is not the concerned attention which the Lord would have us pay to our own spiritual needs and those of our brethren. The watchfulness of this passage is specifically and exclusively the lifelong watching out for those who are causing divisions and offenses and are thereby a danger to Christ's sheep. Romans 16:17-18 simply does not have anything to say about fraternal admonition, nor would it be right for us to import such admonition from some passage which is speaking about brethren. We have no choice but to regard as invalid any interpretation of Romans 16:17-18 which in effect states: "When a person or church body with whom we are in fellowship causes divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, we mark them immediately, then admonish, and if this proves fruitless, avoid them" (affirmed by the ELS in Lutheran Synod Quarterly [2.4 (June 1962): 21]; reaffirmed by the ELS at the Milwaukee meeting).

We take exception also to the implications which the WELS/ELS exegesis finds in the grammatical parallelism between the aspasasthe ("greet") of Romans 16:1-16 and the ekklinate ("avoid") of verse 17. After the introductory parakalō, one would indeed expect to find two complementary infinitives for the "observe" and the "avoid." Why did Paul switch from the infinitive construction for "observe" to the imperative construction for "avoid"? A simple explanation lies in the fact that quite a few words intervene between

the two verb forms. By the time that Paul got to the word "avoid," parakalō was already quite far back, and it was more direct to continue with an imperative. One can examine an earlier passage in Romans for a similar situation. In 12:1-2 Paul similarly begins with parakalō, follows it with a complementary infinitive, and then after a number of intervening words continues with an imperative.

While we would not object to an adversative translation for the particle de in Romans 16:17, we do feel that a transitional rendering, "now," is fully appropriate and more probably correct. This would not result in an awkward break in thought between verses 1-16 and verses 17-18, as we attempted to show in the CLC paper on Romans 16:17-18 at the January 1988 meeting. (A transitional sense for de in this passage is the uniform choice of translators and commentators. While the Germans commonly employ aber as a translation, this German word can have a transitional force. This is evident in Luther's and Philippi's use of aber also in Romans 16:1, immediately after the "Amen" of 15:33. It is evident also in Philippi's commentary following his choice of aber for 16:17: "Das metabatische de zu einem anderen Gegenstande überleitend" [Friedrich Adolph Philippi, Commentar über den Brief Pauli an die Römer (Frankfurt: Heyder & Zimmer, 1866) 696]. Latin versions seem to prefer autem, which word can similarly be used in a transitional sense.)

A few comments on the tous poiountas of verse 17 are also in order. Along with the WELS/ELS, we recognize that the tense of this participle is a linear present. We have no objection to translating it: "those who are causing" divisions and offenses, for it is obviously speaking, not of those who have misspoken or who have erred inadvertently, but of those who are continuing to cause divisions and offenses in Christ's church. Yet, we must caution against any interpretation which would read into the participle a human judgment that the errorists are so committed to their error that they will persist in their disruptive activity in the future. We need only establish that the errorists have the present status of causers of divisions and offenses, and at that moment the avoiding must follow, lest the simple be deceived. The words of Burton are to the point: "The Present Participle is also used without reference to time or progress, simply defining its subject as belonging to a certain class, i.e. the class of those who do the action denoted by the verb. The participle in this case becomes a simple adjective or noun and is, like any other adjective or noun, timeless and indefinite" (Ernest de Witt Burton, Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898, 3rd ed.] par. 123).

II. The CLC Position on Romans 16:17-18 and the Role of Admonition

A. A Summary of the CLC Exegesis

The CLC views the skochein of Romans 16:17-18 as a on-going, unceasing activity of the Christian life, whereby the believer in Christ maintains constant alertness for those who are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of God's Word. As soon as he has ascertained that individuals or a church body have the status of causing such divisions and offenses, he is

to avoid them promptly. Why? Because such false teachers are dangerous; by good words and fair speeches they deceive the hearts of the simple. The apostle's peremptory "avoid" is the voice of the Good Shepherd Himself, as He protects His sheep and lambs from the lies of Satan!

Detailed information on the CLC exegesis of this passage can be found in the essay presented in January 1988.

B. A Critique of the CLC Exegesis

It is, of course, somewhat unusual for a church body to offer a critique of its own position. This critique will, therefore, consist of our response to several questions which have been raised concerning our exegesis of Romans 16:17-18.

At the January 1989 meeting, it was suggested that the CLC is failing to recognize the linear nature of the present infinitive skopein. Rather than this, we insist that the linearity be recognized. As stated above, Paul is asking Christians continually to be on the alert for those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine. This needs to be a lifelong activity, for the devil continues to walk the earth with his deceptions!

At this meeting, moreover, it was stated that our CLC exegesis treats the two words skopein ("keep on observing") and ekklinate ("avoid") as virtually identical in meaning, so that Paul could well have omitted one of them. We do not so treat them. In the skopein lies a life-long activity of watching out for false teachers. In the ekklinate comes the Lord's instruction as to what we are to do when we have spotted such people--we are to avoid them.

The undersigned used the following illustration in an attempt to clarify what we understand as the apostle's meaning in Romans 16:17-18. Each year my wife and I spend a week or so with our son in Florida. I can almost hear him saying to his mother as he leaves his trailer for work: "Hey Mom, I'd ask you to keep your eyes open for cockroaches, and squish 'em!" If we were translating this sentence into Greek, we would surely use a present infinitive for "to keep your eyes open," because this is something that my wife is being asked to do throughout her stay in the trailer. The added imperative, "squish," informs her what to do with a cockroach when she observes one. The verbs are not virtually identical in meaning; each of them adds something important to my son's exhortation to his mother!

Perhaps the most serious charge which has been brought against the CLC exegesis of Romans 16:17-18 (although not at the recent meetings with the WELS and the ELS), is that it is unevangelical and legalistic, inasmuch as it does not recognize fraternal admonition as lying within the meaning of the passage. Surely if we were to apply Romans 16:17-18 to those who have misspoken or inadvertently erred, or to those who have the status of weak brethren, we would deserve to be called unevangelical and legalistic. But when we reserve the application of that passage to those whom we have recognized to be causers of divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine, our prompt avoiding of them is not legalistic but thoroughly evangelical. For by such avoiding, the precious faith of God's dear children is protected from deception. Moreover, by our very avoiding, we are clearly testifying to the false teachers how

serious their error is in the sight of God--in the prayerful hope that they might forsake it and return to the truth!

We wish to affirm, moreover, that we recognize fraternal admonition as a continuing function of Christian love among brethren in the exercise of their fellowship relations, also and especially when there is concern that brethren may have strayed into error. Furthermore, fraternal admonition directed to individuals or to a sister church body and the response thereto does, we believe, play a proper role in ascertaining whether or not those individuals or that church body indeed have the status of causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of God's Word. But if and when it has been established that there is ongoing adherence to and defense of error on their part, then Romans 16:17-18 applies to the situation. We are then to recognize that they have broken the fellowship through their false teaching, and we are to avoid them for the safety of Christ's flock!

III. Doctrinal Implications of the Differences in Exegesis

At the meeting in Milwaukee, it became increasingly apparent that there are significant differences between the WELS/ELS exegesis of Romans 16:17-18 and that of the CLC. Several speakers pointed out that a difference in exegesis need not always be divisive of fellowship between individuals or church bodies. For example, we may not agree with Melancthon's exegesis or application of Romans 14:23 in the Apology, and yet be in full agreement with the doctrine that he is presenting.

Do the aforementioned differences in the exegesis of Romans 16:17-18 fit into this category, so that our synods can enjoy fellowship again if we are otherwise agreed in doctrine and practice? We are frankly concerned about the exegesis of Romans 16:17-18 which has been presented by the WELS/ELS representatives, for two reasons. First, Romans 16:17-18 is a sedes doctrinae for the doctrine of church fellowship. If, as we believe, the WELS/ELS have altered the proper, and commonly recognized, grammatico-historical meaning of the passage by wrongly injecting fraternal admonition into the skopein, then the difference in exegesis is indeed a serious matter. (After writing the first draft of this paper, the undersigned checked all of the commentaries on Romans in the Immanuel Seminary Library and in his personal library. None of them supported the exegesis of the WELS/ELS relative to the skopein; none of them brought any element of fraternal admonition into this word or into the passage. They uniformly understood skopein in the simple sense of "watching out for" those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine. See also Addendum.)

Secondly, the differences in exegesis have historical connections. We too lived through those crucial years of the 1950s and early 1960s, and we have a sincere and loving concern that an unscriptural continuation of fraternal admonition never again become an excuse for prolonging fellowship with a church body that has been recognized as causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine. Any such delay in avoiding false teachers can be a deadly thing, for this passage clearly warns: "They serve not our Lord Jesus

Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple."

ADDENDUM

This writer has subsequently scanned a number of periodical articles and monographs which discuss the exegesis of Romans 16:17-18 and which were written prior to about 1955. He found only one writing in which fraternal admonition seems to be included in the skopein of this passage--an otherwise excellent discussion of spiritual unity, visible union, and unscriptural unionism by Theodore Laetsch in the January 1935 issue of Concordia Theological Monthly ("Foreword" 6.1: 1-11). Dr. Laetsch states:

What the apostle impresses upon us is, "Mark them and avoid them." By their words they are judged, and by their words they are condemned, Matt. 12, 37. And their words prove them to be creators of divisions, disturbers of that unity of the Spirit which characterizes the Church of Christ. Mark them, observe them, plead with them, patiently show them the error of their way. If they hear you, you have not only gained them, you have also removed the offense and restored peace and thus kept the unity of the Spirit intact. But if they continue making divisions, if they persist in teaching their error or remain in membership with a body that teaches such error and thus help to create and maintain the divisions and offenses caused by errorists, then the clear and plain injunction of the apostle is, "Avoid them," sever fraternal connections with them. . . . The point of the apostle's admonition is to avoid those, all those, who cause such divisions. Neither should we wait until they have actually deceived, misled, people, until they have by their actions betrayed their true character; but as soon as they teach contrary to the doctrine laid down in the Bible, they are to be marked, admonished, and, if they continue, avoided. (10)

Dr. Laetsch is clearly injecting a course of in-fellowship admonition between what he refers to as the "marking" and the avoiding. We are not able to accept this insertion of fraternal admonition, for the two reasons discussed in the body of this paper: 1) Romans 16:17-18 says nothing about our dealings with brethren, whether that involve questioning them as to what they said or meant, instructing them from the Word of God, or admonishing them. These functions of Christian love toward our brethren are covered in other passages of the New Testament. 2) The insertion of a course of fraternal admonition between the recognition that some are causing divisions and offenses and the avoidance of them frustrates the very intent of the passage--to isolate the false teachers promptly and decisively, so as to protect Christ's flock from the deception of error. (In the above quotation Dr. Laetsch seems to contradict himself. On the one hand, he urges that we not wait until false teachers have actually deceived and misled people; on the other hand, he asks that we enter into a process of admonition prior to avoiding them--thus giving the false teachers opportunity for precisely such deception!)

We can understand what Dr. Laetsch's concern may have been: namely, that Christians not precipitously sever fellowship with those who may have spoken

inadvertently or may be merely weak brethren with respect to their understanding of Scripture. But the attempt to guard against such violation of Christian love should not take the form of finding something in Romans 16:17-18-- fraternal admonition--which does not lie there. The subsequent history of the 1950s and early 1960s has, we believe, shown such "exegesis" to be a dangerous thing!

One may add here that the ELS quoted Dr. Laetsch's interpretation of Romans 16:17-18 with approval in the confessional statement "Unity, Union, and Unionism" ([Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1938] 27-31). This statement was adopted by the ELS in 1936, and it was approved by the Synodical Conference in 1938. Laetsch's interpretation was, moreover, cited by the ELS in 1962 to "verify" its position that "when a person or church body with whom we are in fellowship causes divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, we mark them immediately, then admonish, and if this proves fruitless, avoid them" (Lutheran Synod Quarterly 2.4 (June 1962): 21).

Of particular interest to this writer was the article "Romans 16, 17.18" by then pastor Walter A. Schumann in the October 1941 Theologische Quartalschrift (38.4: 260-272). We are able to agree with all of Schumann's exegetical conclusions. At no point did he bring fraternal admonition into the skopein of this passage. Here are some of his statements: "Paul then writes: Now I earnestly admonish you, brethren, critically, watchfully to examine, or to look out for those causing divisions and death-traps contrary to the doctrine which you on your part learned" (263). "We have here a warning to keep a sharp look-out, critically to look for errors that lurk here or there, that may hide anywhere, errors that may bring a split and finally a schism among those whose life is grounded and rooted in Christ in every detail. The smallest error may have the most dire consequences" (264). "Paul warns that the Romans keep open a searching eye for such who disrupt the unity. Their teachings often are death-traps. Souls caught in the death-traps are lost" (265). "We translate: 'be on a sharp look-out for those who cause divisions and death-traps'" (266). "'Stay away from them entirely', Paul admonishes" (268).

With such exegesis we have no quarrel!

C. Kuehne

ADDENDUM

Please read and
critique by
Tues. AM. Thanks
CK

This writer has subsequently scanned also a number of periodical articles and monographs which discuss the exegesis of Romans 16:17-18 and which were written prior to about 1955. He found only one writing in which fraternal admonition seems to be included in the skopein of this passage--an otherwise excellent discussion of spiritual unity, visible union, and unscriptural unionism by Theodore Laetsch in the January 1935 issue of Concordia Theological Monthly ("Foreword" 6.1: 1-11). Dr. Laetsch states:

What the apostle impresses upon us is, "Mark them and avoid them." By their words they are judged, and by their words they are condemned, Matt. 12, 37. And their words prove them to be creators of divisions, disturbers of that unity of the Spirit which characterizes the Church of Christ. Mark them, observe them, plead with them, patiently show them the error of their way. If they hear you, you have not only gained them, you have also removed the offense and restored peace and thus kept the unity of the Spirit intact. But if they continue making divisions, if they persist in teaching their error or remain in membership with a body that teaches such error and thus help to create and maintain the divisions and offenses caused by errorists, then the clear and plain injunction of the apostle is, "Avoid them," sever fraternal connections with them. . . . The point of the apostle's admonition is to avoid those, all those, who cause such divisions. Neither should we wait until they have actually deceived, misled, people, until they have by their actions betrayed their true character; but as soon as they teach contrary to the doctrine laid down in the Bible, they are to be marked, admonished, and, if they continue, avoided. (10)

Dr. Laetsch is clearly injecting a course of in-fellowship admonition between what he refers to as the "marking" and the avoiding. We are not able to accept this insertion of fraternal admonition, for the two reasons discussed in the body of this paper: 1) Romans 16:17-18 says nothing about our dealings with brethren, whether that involve questioning them as to what they said or meant, instructing them from the Word of God, or admonishing them. These functions of Christian love toward our brethren are covered in other passages of the New Testament. 2) The insertion of a course of fraternal admonition between the recognition that some are causing divisions and offenses and the avoidance of them frustrates the very intent of the passage--to isolate the false teachers promptly and decisively, so as to protect Christ's flock from the deception of error.

We can understand Dr. Laetsch's concern: namely, that Christians not precipitously sever fellowship with those who may have spoken inadvertently or may be merely weak brethren with respect to their understanding of Scripture. But the attempt to guard against such violation of Christian love should not take the form of finding something in Romans 16:17-18--fraternal admonition--which does not lie there. The subsequent history of the 1950s and early 1960s has, we believe, shown such "exegesis" to be a dangerous thing!

One may add here that the ELS quoted Dr. Laetsch's interpretation of Romans 16:17-18 with approval in the confessional statement "Unity, Union, and Unionism" ([Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1938] 27-31). This statement was adopted by the ELS in 1936, and it was approved by the Synodical

2138

Conference in 1938. Laetsch's interpretation was, moreover, cited by the ELS in 1962 to "verify" its position that "when a person or church body with whom we are in fellowship causes divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, we mark them immediately, then admonish, and if this proves fruitless, avoid them" (Lutheran Synod Quarterly 2.4 (June 1962): 21).

Of particular interest to this writer was the article "Romans 16, 17.18" by then pastor Walter A. Schumann in the October 1941 Theologische Quartalschrift (38.4: 260-272). We are able to agree with all of Schumann's exegetical conclusions. At no point did he bring fraternal admonition into the skopein of this passage. Here are some of his statements: "Paul then writes: Now I earnestly admonish you, brethren, critically, watchfully to examine, or to look out for those causing divisions and death-traps contrary to the doctrine which you on your part learned" (263). "We have here a warning to keep a sharp look-out, critically to look for errors that lurk here or there, that may hide anywhere, errors that may bring a split and finally a schism among those whose life is grounded and rooted in Christ in every detail. The smallest error may have the most dire consequences" (264). "Paul warns that the Romans keep open a searching eye for such who disrupt the unity. Their teachings often are death-traps. Souls caught in the death-traps are lost" (265). "We translate: 'be on a sharp look-out for those who cause divisions and death-traps'" (266). "'Stay away from them entirely', Paul admonishes" (268).

With such exegesis we have no quarrel!

C. Kuehne
February 25, 1989