

1646

THERE IS STILL A DIFFERENCE

A PRESENTATION OF THE OPPOSING POSITIONS
OF THE CHURCH OF THE LUTHERAN CONFESSION
AND THE WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD
IN REGARD TO THE DOCTRINE OF CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

*A reprint of the article entitled "An Open Letter
to Students and Alumni of Northwestern College."
Journal of Theology, June, 1982*

John Lau

1646

THERE IS STILL A DIFFERENCE

During the month of May one receives the annual invitations and announcements concerning the various graduation and commencement activities of the season. One of such invitations and announcements came from the officers of the Alumni Association of Northwestern College, the pre-theological training school of the Wisconsin Synod (WELS) and the Alma Mater of many pastors of the CLC. Together with the usual announcement of commencement activities was enclosed a publication entitled *Northwestern Today*, dated April, 1982. This publication, presumably written and published by the students of Northwestern College, presents articles and pictures concerning past, present, and future events taking place on campus. Of particular interest to members of the CLC is an article entitled "Faculty-Student Discussions," appearing on the first page. We quote the item in its entirety:

"In an effort to inform Northwestern collegiates of certain significant events in the history of the Wisconsin Synod's history [*sic*], the Dormitory Council and Dean Lindemann have set up three convocations on recent conflicts in our church and asked three knowledgeable men in the Synod to speak about these conflicts.

"The first two convocations have already been held, the first on January 20. Professor Friedrich of the Seminary addressed the college on the Protes'tant Controversy, a struggle that began in the 1920's and resulted in the suspension of a number of people from the Synod and the formation of their own group called the Protes'tant Conference. The Protes'tants are still in existence today. Any hope for a reconciliation between WELS and the Protes'tants, however, seems unlikely.

"On February 17 the college was privileged to hear an address by the Rev. Carl Mischke, president of our Synod, on the Church of the Lutheran Confession. This group broke away from the Wisconsin Synod in the late

1950's during the controversy over fellowship with the Missouri Synod. These people claimed that the Wisconsin Synod didn't break fellowship with LC-MS soon enough; and as a result they formed their own church body, the CLC. Unlike the Protes'tants, they set up their own worker-training school. Now, two decades after WELS' break with LC-MS, they are still unwilling to rejoin the Synod.

"This month Northwestern is looking forward to hearing Professor Carl Lawrenz of the Seminary, who is to explain the details of our break with LC-MS."

We are not acquainted with William Tackmeier, who is identified as the author of this report. We assume that he is a student who is giving a factual (though very brief) report of what was presented, or what he believed to have been presented, at the two convocations held prior to the time of writing. We furthermore make the assumption that *Northwestern Today* was published with the knowledge and approval of some member of the Northwestern faculty and, at the very least, under the aegis of the officers of the Northwestern College Alumni association.

We will leave it up to the Protes'tants to determine whether or not they were given fair treatment in this report of Prof. Friedrich's presentation. But we do feel that an attempt ought to be made to examine what the report quotes Pres. Mischke as stating about the origin and present status of the CLC *vis-a'-vis* the WELS, and then to respond to it. Our reason for doing so is not merely to engage in polemics in regard to a student report or, for that matter, to take issue with Pres. Mischke over his presentation. No doubt Pres. Mischke had more to say on the subject assigned to him than what was reported. In fact, we are sure that he was thorough and fair in his presentation and did not seek to present the members of the CLC as schismatic or as having no basis for their actions. However, we have noted over the years that what is repeated in the item by Mr. Tackmeier has become a convenient way for members of the Wisconsin Synod to dismiss the formation and existence of the CLC: "These people claimed that the Wisconsin Synod didn't break fellowship with LC-MS soon enough; and as a result they formed their own church body, the CLC. ... Now, two decades af-

ter WELS' break with LC-MS, they are still unwilling to rejoin the Synod."

What this really amounts to is an accusation that the members of the CLC have been and are schismatic — that they are like children who refuse to play because their playmates do not want to play the game they want, when they want it! We have said it again and again, and we will now repeat it once more: We have never been concerned with a timetable. If that were the case, we could not have formed a church body, for those of us who became members of the CLC did not all come out from the Synodical Conference at the same time and as one man. (Indeed, we certainly did not all come out from WELS; consequently it is specious to speak of "rejoining" WELS!)

What is important, rather, is the Scriptural basis for separation from heterodox individuals and/or church bodies! The reason for withdrawing from fellowship is vital, whereas the time at which individuals may come to an awareness of the Scriptural necessity for withdrawing may depend upon a variety of factors, not least of which may be an unwillingness to face facts or even simple disobedience to God's Word.

We have reason to believe that at one point in time the Wisconsin Synod officially recognized that our two church bodies had an honest doctrinal difference, not merely a difference of opinion over whether or not the break from LC-MS was "soon enough." As evidence, we quote from the 1972 resolution of the WELS in its 42nd Biennial Convention:

Whereas a joint meeting of our Commission on Inter-Church relations with the Board of Doctrine of the Church of the Lutheran Confession in July, 1972, produced no positive results on questions dealing with the doctrine of Church Fellowship (specifically, the matter of dealing between church bodies when error or false doctrine has arisen); and

Whereas our Commission agreed with the conviction expressed by the CLC representatives that continued discussion on this matter at that meeting would

serve no purpose; and

Whereas no further arrangements have been made for doctrinal discussions with the CLC Board of Doctrine; therefore be it

Resolved,

- a) That we express regret over the failure at that meeting to reach agreement on the doctrine under discussion; and be it finally

Resolved,

- b) That we ask our Commission on Inter-Church Relations to avail itself of any new opportunities to resume discussions with the CLC Board of Doctrine, as conditions may warrant.

Point a) of the adopted resolution clearly states that there was "failure ... to reach agreement on the doctrine under discussion," namely "... the doctrine of Church Fellowship (specifically, the matter of dealing between church bodies when error or false doctrine has arisen)."

One needs to examine the official record of what took place in the Wisconsin Synod during the 1950's in order to determine the extent of the doctrinal disagreement that exists between WELS and the CLC. In 1955, based upon both the Report and the Supplementary Report of its Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union, the Wisconsin Synod convention unanimously passed the following statement and resolution:

In view of these facts your Floor Committee, together with the Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union, affirms "our position that the Missouri Synod ..." has brought about a break in relations and that our Synod, bound by the Word of God, should now declare itself on the matter. ... A church body which creates divisions and offenses by its official resolutions, policies, and practices not in accord with Scripture also becomes subject to the indictment of Romans 16:17-18. The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod has by its official resolutions, policies, and practices created divisions and offenses

both in her own body and in the entire Synodical Conference. Such divisions and offenses are of long standing." (1955 *Proceedings* of the WELS.)

This resolution clearly states that it was the unanimous belief and recognition on the part of the delegates representing the Wisconsin Synod in its 1955 convention that, on the basis of Romans 16:17-18, the LC-MS had been marked as a church body that was causing divisions and offenses. God's Word is clear as to what the Christian is to do over against such: avoid them; that is, have no fellowship with them. Yet, with a two-to-one majority vote, the Wisconsin Synod delegates decided to postpone the decision to sever fellowship relations with the LC-MS!

For corroboration of this bit of history we need only turn to two official interpretations that were published that same year within the WELS. The *Post-Convention News Bulletin*, published to interpret for members of the Wisconsin Synod the meaning of the synodical resolutions, reported, in part: "Agreement on the fact that Romans 16:17-18 applied to the situation in the Missouri Synod was almost unanimous. [Actually, the record indicates that the vote was unanimous.] The divisions and offenses are clear. There was an honest difference of opinion on whether it was necessary to break relations completely with the Missouri Synod now or whether we, in the words of our President, 'still have an unpaid debt of love to those whose fellowship we cherished so many years.' The body, by a vote of two to one, decided to wait a year." This article certainly made it clear that the WELS had determined that the judgment of Romans 16:17-18 applied to the LC-MS "because of its persistent adherence to its unionistic practices."

The second of the two official interpretations was published in the *Northwestern Lutheran*: "The preamble (of the 1955 resolution), which reiterated the 1953 charges of our Synod and applied Romans 16:17-18, was unanimously adopted. All were firmly convinced and fully agreed that the charge of unionism against the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod was valid and that the Romans passage is applicable, even though some could not agree

that action be deferred until the next meeting of that Synod."

It was from this point on that it became evident to many in the WELS that the synod was taking a position which could not be defended from Scripture; namely, that even though a church body with which WELS had been in fellowship had been clearly identified and marked as causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine, it was not necessary to avoid that church body at that time, with the plea that by delaying the decision to avoid one might be paying "an unpaid debt of love."

So many protests arose from the synod's failure to act in accordance with Romans 16:17-18 that a "Protest Committee" was established to deal with the matter. This committee reported its findings of the situation to the 1957 convention of the Wisconsin Synod. The report did not differ in any way from the interpretations already cited, and it was adopted by the convention, with no objections recorded in the *Proceedings*. Thus, even as late as 1957, the WELS acknowledged: "While there exists in our midst confusing divergence of opinion regarding the interpretation of Romans 16:17-18, especially with regard to the meaning of the expression 'avoid them'; while essays were delivered and it would appear were officially or tacitly accepted in our midst, which are not in harmony with one another; yet the Synod did speak a very clear language concerning this passage at the Saginaw Convention in 1955 when it passed a resolution unanimously, stating that the passage did apply to the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, though the voting on the break was delayed, for the reasons given, for another year."

By 1958, however, the Protest Committee and the leadership of the Wisconsin Synod began to speak another language. A line of argumentation developed by Professor Carl Lawrenz of the WELS Seminary at Mequon, Wisconsin, was beginning to prevail. As presented by the Protest Committee, it was now argued that the 1955 convention of the WELS did not "conclusively" apply the judgment of Romans 16:17-18 to the LC-MS at that time, but, rather, postponed its entire judgment on the matter. As has been shown, this new interpretation was very different from

what had been the official interpretation at the time the 1955 resolution was adopted. The Protest Committee was forced to acknowledge this also, for in its "Letter to the Protesting Brethren" of the WELS, dated June 27, 1958, after quoting Professor Lawrenz' interpretation, the committee declared: "It is true that many did not understand the resolution in that way originally. The members of your Protest Committee will need to admit that they did not understand it that way at the time."

It was this, then, that accounted for the Wisconsin Synod's willingness to practice a "vigorously protesting" fellowship with the LC-MS even after having identified that church body as causing divisions and offenses (Romans 16:17-18). It was further explained in 1959, when the WELS convention of that year accepted as correct the statement: "Termination of church fellowship is called for when you have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail and that the erring brother or church body demands recognition for their error." Later, this situation was described by the WELS as the conviction that "an impasse has been reached." This incorrect interpretation of Romans 16:17-18 has now become the very fabric out of which the Wisconsin Synod theology of church fellowship has been woven, and it has given rise to many difficulties.

For Romans 16:17-18 simply does not contain any instructions of the Lord that one must reach a "conviction that admonition is of no further avail," etc. The key to an awareness of whom and when to avoid is found in the passage itself: "... σκοπεῖν τοὺς τὰς διχοστασίας καὶ τὰ σκάνδαλα παρὰ τὴν διδαχὴν ἣν ὑμεῖς ἐμάθετε ποιοῦντας — mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." Those who in an on-going way cause divisions and offenses by their doctrine and/or practice contrary to the teaching of our Lord are to be spiritually avoided. When? When they are causing divisions and offenses! There is nothing in the passage which instructs the Christian to observe the course of admonition and base his decision as to avoiding on the possible results of that admonition. This is not to deny that one must carefully ascertain that the errorist is teaching or practicing incorrectly

in an on-going way; that is to say, that his error is not an inadvertent slip. Admonition may serve to reveal the situation in its true light, especially in difficult cases. However, the situation may be made equally clear in other ways.

When the continuation of the practice of fellowship with errorists is based upon hoped-for results of admonition ("when you have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail"), then human judgment is being substituted for the judgment of God. When, therefore, the WELS withdrew the hand of fellowship from the LC-MS in 1961, it did not do so because the LC-MS was guilty of causing divisions and offenses contrary to the Word of God. After all, that judgment had been unanimously made by Wisconsin's convention in 1955, and separation had not come about. No, the reason that WELS separated from the LC-MS was plainly and simply that by 1961 a majority of the representatives at the WELS convention of that year were convinced that admonition would be of no further avail and that "an impasse had been reached." The present writer attended the 1961 convention of WELS and can still vividly remember the argumentation on the floor. No one really attempted to show that LC-MS was causing divisions and offenses; rather, spokesmen for the WELS' official committees attempted to persuade the delegates that admonition had gone as far as it could and that an impasse had been reached. It was on that basis, then, that a majority of the delegates were persuaded, although many were not, as the vote indicated. Thus Wisconsin's break from LC-MS did come about, but on the wrong basis and without true Scriptural justification.

When one is dealing with an individual who has "trespassed against thee" (Matthew 18:15-18), then, as the passage plainly sets forth, the course and effect of the admonition is all important in the procedure. "If he listens to you ... but if he does not listen to you ..." Here, of course, the context shows us that we are dealing with the Office of the Keys, opening or shutting the gate of heaven. The obdurate failure on the part of the individual to heed Christian admonition on account of his sin can only result in his eventual excommunication. When the Wisconsin Synod attempts to insist upon this proced-

ure when dealing with a church body, it can only cause confusion and error; it is impossible for one church body to excommunicate another. God does not expect or demand such action. Rather, He requires only that we take note of and identify the one or many who cause divisions and offenses in an on-going way by their false doctrine or their false practice, and then terminate our fellowship relations with them.

The last of several meetings between representatives of the WELS and the CLC was held July 18-19, 1972. In that meeting it became very clear to both sides what the point of our controversy (*status controversiae*) is. To sum this up, we shall repeat what we have previously observed (*Journal of Theology*, December, 1977, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 39-40):

The result of the meetings? It has become clear and accepted among us that there is no difference in the doctrine and practice of our two church bodies in applying the teachings of Scripture on termination of fellowship to individual errorists. The difference lies in the application of the principle to church bodies. As the resolution adopted by the CLC in 1974 declares: "The doctrinal difference is summarized by our president in his report to the convention: 'Your Board of Doctrine presented the simple proposition that Scripture calls for a termination of fellowship with any church body that is teaching error. The representatives of the WELS offered the judgment that this could not always be done when a church body was infected with error, because of the concern that must be shown for those in that body who were not supporting its official position.'"

Wisconsin defends the maintaining of a fellowship relationship with a false-teaching church body for two purposes: (1) To offer opportunity to determine what the confessional position of a church really is, because of controversies existing within that false-teaching group itself; and (2) To offer opportunity to bring testimony to those individuals within the false-teaching group who do not themselves

espouse the error(s). This WELS calls being *in statu confessionis* (in a state of confession). The CLC responds that admonition can better be brought outside of the framework of practicing fellowship, and that such admonition is certainly not eliminated by the application of Romans 16:17-18 ("Avoid them") to a false-teaching church body. While we, also, recognize the urging in Scripture to deal gently with the confused and weak and unlearned, and to make earnest efforts to preserve the bonds of fellowship between brethren, yet we find in these pleadings of the Holy Spirit no instruction that would allow us to disobey God's clear instruction in Romans 16.

For further amplification on this point, the reader is urged to read the article entitled "WELS and CLC — Is There Still a Difference?" in the Panorama section of the *Journal of Theology*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (December, 1972), pp. 36-39.

And thus the situation rests. Our two church bodies have gone separate ways and have done so for the very proper reason: We are not in agreement in the doctrine of Church Fellowship. Both church bodies have, however, declared themselves willing to hold further discussions. One hopes that God-pleasing discussions between us may take place in the future — not with the wish to become stronger through external union, but, rather, that the truth of God's Word be served and defended! The present writer expressed such a hope back in 1977 (*Cf.* the *Journal of Theology* article in Vol. 17 previously referred to): "The only key to a resolution, if it be possible, of the difference in doctrine that still exists between our church bodies lies in a continued, on-going study of God's Word. It is our hope and prayer that we of the CLC and also our former brethren of the WELS and ELS will not give up in this matter, but will study Scripture and the Confessions for guidance." The personal opinion was then also stated that perhaps free conferences, properly constituted, might provide the best avenue for such an approach. However, to be beneficial, discussion must center on and remain centered on the *status controversiae*.

One is, of course, troubled over the always present

danger that in the intervening years diverging streams of practice have brought about a wider separation between the CLC and the WELS than we have been aware of. For example, the WELS at present seems far from recognizing the sinful unionism involved in membership in certain fraternal life insurance associations (such as the Aid Association for Lutherans and Lutheran Brotherhood).

Copies of this reprint may be obtained through:

CLC BOOKHOUSE
Immanuel Lutheran College
501 Grover Road
Eau Claire, Wisconsin 54701