
Voices From The Past

John Lau

Sometime during 1985 I received a catalog from LCUSA (Lutheran Council in the USA) offices in New York. The catalog was entitled "The Oral History Collection of the Archives of Cooperative Lutheranism," and offered to "qualified researchers" access to written transcripts of oral history interviews held with individuals who have been influential in the history of modern American Lutheranism. The transcripts have been edited for accuracy by the persons interviewed. I was especially interested in obtaining access to transcripts of interviews with Oscar J. Naumann and Carl J. Lawrenz, of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). The interview with former-President Naumann was "open"; i.e., it had been cleared for research without restriction by the respondent before his death in 1979, the same year the interview was held. "Open" also means that permission to cite or quote for publication is not required. The transcript of the Lawrenz interview, on the other hand, was described in the catalog: "Permission required to cite or quote."

I attempted, through correspondence and telephone conversation, to obtain copies of the transcripts in which I was interested, but soon learned that access to the material had to be made in person. After the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 1988, the Oral History Collection became a part of the ELCA Archives, located near the ELCA headquarters in Chicago. My desire to read the Naumann/Lawrenz transcripts was reactivated during 1990-91, and finally, in October 1991, I made use of the invitation I received to speak at the 25th anniversary of the CLC congregation in Addison, Illinois, to spend an entire morning at the ELCA archives. I learned that since Prof. Lawrenz was now deceased, there were no longer any restrictions as to reading, citing or quoting from the transcript of his interview, which had taken place in 1983.

I.

Both Professor Lawrenz and President Naumann discussed some issues that came into conflict in the Synodical Conference in the 1940s and 1950s.

"Cooperation in External" Lawrenz (p. 16):

Another issue that was already there in 1944 was the matter of so-called "cooperation in externals" with those who were not in doctrinal agreement and in church fellowship relationship. Actually these examples of cooperation in externals involve forms of joint worship and church work. Joint endeavors, according to WELS conviction, do not remove doctrinal differences, but they lead those who are still sensitive about doctrinal differences to forget them, to grow indifferent to the authority of the Word of God.

The understanding of the very real dangers inherent in so-called "cooperations in externals" revealed by Prof. Lawrenz' statement finds full support among members of the CLC. Note that the statement also includes joint endeavors as forms of church work not to be engaged in by those who are not in doctrinal agreement and in church fellowship relationship. A confessional statement of the CLC declares: ". . . when this expression ["cooperation in externals"] is used to allow working together with heterodox bodies in religious matters, then we condemn the expression as a cloak for sinful disobedience to the Word of God, and a procedure which confuses and offends the simple Christian" (*Concerning Church Fellowship*, Par. 81, p. 37). In view of the "Lutheran Leadership Consultation," involving 130 leaders from the ELCA, LCMS, and WELS, held last July under the sponsorship of Lutheran Brotherhood, a fraternal insurance and financial planning organization, one cannot help wondering if WELS still agrees with what Prof. Lawrenz said about joint endeavors.

Prayer Fellowship and Joint Prayer Lawrenz (p. 33):

Scripture also gives no warrant for distinction between prayer fellowship and an occasional joint prayer that is not prayer fellowship. True prayer, in our conviction, is an expression of Christian faith, and joint prayer is a

joint expression of such faith, thus always prayer fellowship. The question in each instance must always remain whether, according to Scripture, it is proper or improper prayer fellowship, not whether it is prayer fellowship.

We can appreciate the careful wording of this statement, especially since there is very little interest among "main-line" Lutherans today in scriptural clarity in the theology of church fellowship. The ELCA is not even making a pretense at limiting the practice of fellowship to those who are confessionally agreed; it reveals a far greater interest in establishing fellowship relations with the Protestant Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches. It remains to be seen how pervasive the widely-touted "levels of fellowship" doctrine of the LCMS leadership has become, or whether more confessional elements will prevail. We hope that WELS still retains the concern in this matter demonstrated by its former professor.

"Theology of Fellowship" Naumann (p. 15):

At that time [1954] they [LCMS] asked Dr. Martin Franzmann . . . to draw up a statement which became part of what was later known as the *Theology of Fellowship*; this was *Part II*. And in that of course the new position of Missouri [LCMS] became evident. They made the statement in that *Theology of Fellowship, Part II* that passages such as Rom 16:17-18 do not apply to erroristic church bodies, the passage does not apply to them, but to unbelievers and infidels only. That demonstrated to us that the position of the Missouri Synod with regard to church fellowship had definitely changed and showed to us also why they had hesitated so long to put themselves in writing. But we reached an impasse at that time. That which caused the impasse has not been removed to this day.

It was in 1955, then, that the WELS Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union brought its unanimously adopted recommendation that the WELS convention break off fellowship relations with LCMS on the basis of Romans 16:17-18. It is interesting that Pres. Naumann used the expression "reached an impasse" to describe the situation back in 1954, and, speaking in 1979, added: "That which caused the impasse has not been removed to this day." Since that expression was the one also

used in 1961, when WELS did break fellowship with LCMS, there is no doubt but that Pres. Naumann was already convinced in 1954 that LCMS was causing divisions and offenses and was to be avoided at the next WELS convention in 1955. How sad that this conviction was not fulfilled! The 1955 WELS convention unanimously adopted the following 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 WELS*)

Even though, as its adopted resolution declared, the WELS was fully convinced that the LCMS was causing divisions and offenses, yet, with a two-to-one majority vote, the WELS delegates decided not to avoid, as Romans 16:17-18 requires, but to postpone the decision to sever fellowship relations with the LCMS. The postponement lasted six years! And when WELS did sever fellowship relations with LCMS in 1961, it did so on the basis of a statement it had approved in its 1959 convention: "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." This is the situation that WELS once again described by declaring, "An impasse has been reached." This incorrect interpretation of Romans 16:17-18 has now become the very fabric out of which the WELS theology of church fellowship has been woven.

II.

The "Lawrenz Interpretation" There was no doubt from 1955 to 1957 as to what WELS had said and done in its 1955 convention. This can be shown from

three sources of the time. The *Post-Convention News Bulletin*, published to interpret for WELS members 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. - J.L.] 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 have cherished so many years." The body, by a vote of two to one, decided to wait a year. (Emphasis in the original. - J.L.)

The second of 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.

The third source is from the report of the "Protest Committee" presented to and approved by the 1957 WELS convention. Even as late as 1957, then, 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 a line of argumentation developed by Prof. Lawrenz was beginning to prevail in WELS. It was now argued that the 1955 WELS convention did not "conclusively" apply the judgment of Romans 16:17-18 to the LCMS at that time

but, rather, postponed its entire judgment on the matter. As can be seen from the above quotations, this new interpretation was very different from the official interpretations at the time the 1955 resolution was adopted and as late as 1957. Even the "Protest Committee," in its "Letter to the Protesting Brethren" of the WELS dated June 27, 1958, after quoting Prof. Lawrenz' interpretation, 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.

In the transcript of Prof. Lawrenz' oral interview, his recollection and interpretation of the events of 1955-56 are as follows (p. 57):

. . . The indictment expressed in the preamble [1955 WELS *Proceedings*] and in the wording of the resolution that was to be voted on in '56 were [sic] made conditional by Stipulation 2. According to this Stipulation 2, we still awaited the additional evidence of Missouri's answer to our charges in its delegate convention of 1956.

We adopted the stipulation: "That we might continue to heed the scriptural exhortations to patience and forbearance in love by giving the LCMS opportunity to express itself at the 1956 convention." Our Synod did not want to put the Missouri Synod under the indictment of Romans 16:17 and terminate fellowship, which would have far-reaching consequences, until it had been assured that the position taken by the officials and the official committees of the Missouri Synod was, in spite of our intensified testimony since 1953, really shared also by the majority of the delegates from Missouri Synod congregations throughout the country. The 1955 resolutions, therefore, still kept us in a state of confession over against Missouri; however, one of very vigorous protest.

Since we had not conclusively applied Romans 16:17-18, we had also not disobeyed its injunction. . . . That was, and still is, my understanding of the action of the 1955 convention. Who would say that the Saginaw resolutions [1955] did not leave room for greater clarity?

I would have considered that presumptuous, lording over God's heritage; neither was I willing to make a decision by action on our fellowship with Missouri all by myself, unless it could clearly be convinced—I could be clearly convinced in my conscience that this was the only thing that I could do in obedience to my Lord; and I was not able to do that.

IV.

What keeps WELS and CLC apart? Both respondents, Pres. Naumann and Prof. Lorenz were asked to comment on this question. It is interesting that both men revealed a concern about their perceived fear that the CLC demands some sort of statement of repentance going all the way back to the 1950s on the part of every individual WELS member who approaches the CLC in order to ascertain whether confessional agreement exists. Perhaps in the early years of the separation this fear had some basis—on both sides.

Since that time, however, we of the CLC have said over and over again that we are not concerned with a timetable. We ourselves did not all withdraw from WELS or other member synods of the Synodical Conference at the same time. Even today pastors who have been members of WELS or LCMS are joining the CLC by colloquy. Speaking for myself, I withdrew from WELS in 1959 and was involved in the organization of the CLC. I was never asked to make a statement of repentance for not having withdrawn earlier. Our concern in forming the CLC was to prepare confessional statements on the scriptural doctrine of church fellowship, particularly on the termination thereof, not to set timetables or to demand sackcloth and ashes of those who joined us.

To those who maintain that the CLC demands repentance back to the 1950s, we can only repeat what we have declared before:

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 dis-

obedience to God's Word. (*Journal of Theology*, June 1982)

The concern with a timetable actually stems, it seems to me, from statements coming out of WELS that claim that our withdrawal from fellowship with WELS was because of a time factor. Here is one example of such statements:

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 1950s 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. (*Journal of Theology*, June 1982; quoted from *Northwestern Today*, April 1982; emphasis added.)

The following, then, is the statement made by Pres. Naumann in his oral history interview of January 24, 1979 (p. 26):

. . . The former brethren that now form the Church of the Lutheran Confession are convinced that we still have to repent of our failure to terminate as soon as they terminated. . . . Now they're asking us to repent back to the days when they left us so that our sins of stalling for time, carrying on our admonitions would be forgiven. We're not convinced that we were wrong in doing it as we did. I will say, however, that this matter was brought to their attention at one meeting that I attended and we mentioned to them that they did not reach that conviction as individuals and individual congregations at the same time. . . . And one of their pastors, a younger man at the time, said, "Well, we've all repented back to October '56." We didn't think the Lord wanted that kind of mechanical confessional action from us.

When the interviewer asked Prof. Lawrenz, "What keeps Wisconsin and the CLC apart?", the respondent had a lengthy reply in which he summarized his recollection of attempts at reconciliation between the two church bodies. (The first paragraph also dealt with the matter of a demanded repentance.)

The burden of answering this question should

really be left to the men who terminated their fellowship with our synod. I had always hoped that those (of WELS) who in following their conscience broke fellowship with the Missouri Synod at an earlier date would seek to reestablish fellowship with our synod when it had likewise terminated its fellowship with the LCMS. Those who did so and expressed their full agreement with our synod's position in doctrine and practice were fraternally received. They were not asked to repent for having felt bound in their conscience to break fellowship earlier. In a similar way we have fraternally received former LCMS members who sought our fellowship, expressing full agreement with our confessional position. We have not asked them to repent because they felt that they still had an admonitory testimony to carry out in the midst of their affiliation, when WELS had already terminated their fellowship with the LCMS.

The last WELS effort to reach agreement in the hope of re-establishing fellowship with those who had left us and who were now in the CLC, the Church of the Lutheran Confession, were [sic] made in a meeting on July 18-19, 1972, in Milwaukee. A difference in the field of church fellowship practice became evident when the discussion turned to dealing with a church body with whom you have been in fellowship, but in which false doctrine and practice have arisen. The CLC acknowledged no warrant for a transitional state of confession. Our WELS representatives held that such a state of confession is frequently called for before terminating fellowship with a group that has been infected by error, for the following reasons: (1) In order to offer opportunity for determining what the confessional position of the group for which it must be held responsible really is. It may become necessary because of mutually exclusive statements, pronouncements, resolutions made in such a group; because of conflicting positions contending for mastery in this group, one or the other of which may for good reason be considered to be only temporarily in control. (2) To offer opportunity to bring scriptural testimony against the error infecting the group to those brethren who are not themselves advocating and propagating the errors—before treating such brethren as responsible partakers of the error or false doctrine infect-

ing their group.

Our representatives held such a procedure to be called for to satisfy the many scriptural injunctions quoted in our church fellowship statement bidding us to exercise patience and make earnest efforts to preserve the bond of confessional fellowship, to help the weak and confused. After WELS had made this declaration the CLC representatives declared that continued discussion would serve no further purpose.

A couple of statements of Prof. Lawrenz require comment. The first is: "The CLC acknowledged no warrant for a transitional state of confession." What we are declaring is simply that Romans 16:17-18 provides that Christians are to watch out for (*skopein*) those who in an on-going way cause divisions and offenses by their false doctrine and practice. When they have recognized that such is the case, there is no scriptural warrant for a state of confession, if by that is meant the continuation of the practice of fellowship. St. Paul simply says: "Avoid them!" In 1955 the question of LCMS causing divisions and offenses was no longer in doubt for WELS; its resolution said so! There was from then on no warrant even for a "vigorously protesting" fellowship.

The second statement requiring comment is identified in Prof. Lawrenz' remarks as items (1) and (2). All of these activities may be the proper and God-pleasing things to do while one is attempting to determine whether the divisions and offenses going on are the responsibility of individuals or of a church body. They are no longer to be carried out within the framework of fellowship practice once the determination has been made. Again, in 1955 WELS expressed its judgment of the entire Missouri Synod: "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" (1955 *Proceedings* of WELS).

V.

Prospects for the Future?

Both respondents answered the question, "Are there any possibilities or prospects for future contact with the CLC?" Both expressed the hope that there were. However, in each case that hope involved the CLC's coming around to the position of

WELS in the controverted doctrines. This is how Prof. Lawrenz expressed it (p. 80):

It has been my hope that the future generation of the CLC who did not burn all their bridges when they left the fellowship of WELS will some day be able to see the scriptural warrant of the WELS position on a state of confession, and find themselves in agreement with the WELS position in doctrine and practice.

In Pres. Naumann's reply to the question, he expresses the opinion that the proof of the correctness of the WELS position in the matter of church fellowship is found, at least in part, in the activity and growth of his church body. "Are there any possibilities or prospects for future contact with the CLC?" He answers (p. 26):

I sincerely hope there are. I can't, I won't attempt to make any predictions, but I believe that if they study their church history of the last two decades they would have to say that the Lord has not withdrawn His hand from us, nor His Word from us. He is blessing the work that we are carrying on. I'm convinced that it was not sinful to put forth an effort of the magnitude that we tried to put forth in the hope of winning at least and convincing at least some in the sister synod if not the leaders and the entire church body. And I'm not convinced that this was a sinful action. I think it was an action that was pleasing to the Lord and I draw that conclusion from the manner in which He's blessing our church's activity and its growth at present, not by our effort or our dedication but certainly we must lay our growth and the unity within our church body to the grace of God and His blessing and to nothing else.

The transcripts contain remarks on many other subjects as well; I believe that I have fairly quoted material that deals with the history of the church fellowship controversy and the doctrinal issues involved. It is truly my intention to follow the motto: *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*. These men were my professor and my president; I learned from them and I revere their memory. Honesty compels me to show, as best I can, where their theology in the doctrine of church fellowship went astray and ought not to be followed.