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A RED HERRING IN THE WELS FELLOWSHIP DOCTRINE

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A Red Herring in the WELS Fellowship Doctrine

Bertram J. Naumann¹

When a herring is dried and smoked, the curing process turns the fish red and makes it highly aromatic. In days gone by, one redeeming use of the cured herring was to drag it across the path of hounds chasing down the scent of an otherwise doomed fox. In turn, the aristocratic men and ladies astride their steeds were likewise turned from their purpose of running an eventually exhausted fox to ground. And so the fox was saved for another future outing. Without carrying the similarities too far, it appears to this writer that by the historic introduction of the words "persistent errorist" as necessary to identify a false teacher properly, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) has allowed a "red herring" to lead them, wittingly or unwittingly, away from the action Scripture calls for in our dealing with false teachers, as revealed in Titus 3:10-11, Romans 16:17-18 and other passages.

The introduction of the word "persistent" by the WELS into the fellowship doctrine, and specifically into the question of when to apply the command of separation, is a fact pointed out not only in the writings of the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC), but is also freely and frequently declared in the statements and publications of the WELS.

Throughout the controversy leading to the split and the formation of the CLC, there were, to be sure, numerous references made by some of the CLC's founding fathers to "persistent" errorists, apparently done on their part with tacit approval to the use of this term. However, it is a primary purpose of this article at least to indicate the dangerous and unscriptural directions which more recent and current usages of the term in the WELS have been leading. We contend furthermore, and it has been so stated in CLC writings, that were the now sainted fathers aware of how far afield the word "persistent" would be applied in the future to delay taking the action which Scripture requires, they would most certainly have disavowed its continued use. We also contend that the CLC and WELS positions regarding the need to determine "persistent errorists" are really quite different.² As a brief assessment of the CLC position, we quote Pastor Daniel Fleischer in his unpublished essay "There Still is a Difference":

The CLC is consistent in its position, which contends that

identified and acknowledged false teachers and church bodies are to be avoided without any attempt to determine persistence.³

Mark Braun, a WELS associate professor of theology at Wisconsin Lutheran College, wrote the following in his article, “A Tale of Two Synods: Lessons from the Dissolution of the Synodical Conference”:

The traditional understanding and usage of the passage [Romans 16:17-18], at least since the beginning of the century in both synods [WELS and LCMS], was that it prohibited any expression of church fellowship unless based on complete agreement in doctrine. *The doctrine* referred to all of Scripture’s teaching; distinctions between fundamental and nonfundamental doctrines were invalid. The verb form used for those who *cause divisions and offenses* suggested a repeated, habitual practice, rather than an occasional mistake in word or action.... The passage warned against those whose repeated action caused divisions and placed obstacles in the path of believers. These divisions and offences were *contrary to the doctrine* – hence, the uniquely WELS term “persistent errorist” (*CHARIS*, March 2001, 1:1, pp. 34-35).⁴

We should note especially what is said in the last sentence. The term “persistent errorist” is identified as “uniquely WELS.”

The CLC has stated repeatedly and emphasized, in word as well as action, that an errorist is to be identified by the acknowledged fact of his false teaching. To determine that the false teaching in question is not merely a slip of the tongue, an unintentional mistake, but an established fact, the word “persistent” may have a limited place, albeit far less than usage in the WELS seems to be leading that church body. Therefore, to avoid opening up the Pandora’s Box of false practice into which the WELS has become embroiled, we believe it is better not to use the words “persistent” or “persistent errorist” as a necessary component in identifying a false teacher.

The “persistent errorist” principle in recent WELS statements

To provide an example of such false practice occurring within the WELS today, we turn to the choir policy of Wisconsin Lu-

theran College (WLC) and cite a few paragraphs from "A Statement Regarding Non-WELS Students in the College's Choirs." It too is written by Dr. Mark Braun, edited by Dr. John E. Bauer and begins with an explanatory preface: "In response to inquiries regarding the WLC's practice of including non-WELS students in its choirs, this statement was written in December 2002 to provide a rationale for the College's practice within the context of the WELS' doctrinal position on church fellowship."⁵

If a student does not know the teachings of our church body, we believe our mission as a college and as a church body is to unfold the Scriptures to them, in the classroom and in other settings, and to involve them in appropriate spiritual elements of our campus life. Assuming that such a student is a weak fellow Christian and not a persistent errorist, we follow the practical implications expressed in the essay on fellowship: "Weakness of faith is *not in itself a reason for terminating church fellowship*, but rather *an encouragement for practicing church fellowship more vigorously* to help one another overcome our weakness of faith. *In precept and example Scripture abounds with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak*" (*Doctrinal Statements*, p. 33, emphasis ours).

It is not always easy to determine whether a person is a weak fellow Christian or a persistent errorist. We face the same challenge that our congregations and our area Lutheran high schools face when we meet and seek to serve those who do not belong to the WELS. It would be uncharitable for us to assume that all members of other church bodies are persistent errorists, particularly when their actions reveal that they are willing, even eager, to learn more about what we believe. Evangelical practice requires us to recognize other factors besides the denominational membership of such people.

It is our belief that the College has an obligation, in a pastoral and evangelical way, to determine as best we can whether a non-WELS student acts out of weakness of faith or in persistent error. Evangelical practice means we examine each situation individually. We do not accept what may be considered a "one size fits all" approach in which a category of students is treated in the same way one might treat a

visitor to a congregation. Such an approach runs the risk of mechanical and legalistic application. Mission prospects and non-WELS students do not come with the same level of understanding.

We believe our practice of including non-WELS students in our choirs is consistent with our synod's *Doctrinal Statements* so long as these students do not act in persistent error.

While the directive of Romans 16:17-18 is addressed to "brethren," the passages are not limited to such and give clear instructions for what is to be done when error has infected a person or a church body. Yet with one grand sweep the aforementioned policy of Wisconsin Lutheran College circumvents the same passages in dealing with potential students outside of the WELS fellowship; this is done with the rationale that since all Christians are invisibly united in the One True Church, the Una Sancta, they need to determine, as best they are able, "whether a non-WELS student acts out of weakness of faith or in persistent error." So the question must arise:

Are we then to fellowship freely with all whom we somehow perceive to be merely weak in faith, as long as they do not act in "persistent error?"

Our own confessional document "Concerning Church Fellowship" provides, we believe, an answer that is fully in accord with Scripture. Under the section "Argument from Matthew 18" we point to paragraphs 70 and 71:

We are also told that, in keeping with Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18:15-17 for making every effort to regain the man who has trespassed against us, patience should be exercised toward the erring teachers. It should be clear that to avoid a false teacher and to look upon a man as a heathen and a publican are two entirely different things. The former is based on the danger inherent in the goods which are being peddled as truth. The latter is based on the evidence of an unrepentant heart. The false teacher may indeed, in individual cases, eventually prove himself to be an unrepentant sinner, one who is willfully blaspheming God's Word against his better knowledge. In that case we would have to consider him as a heathen man and a publican. But to contend that until this is true he is to be allowed to have the status of a

teacher in good standing in the Church, this is utterly preposterous. He is to be avoided because he is dangerous (Rom. 16:18). He is dangerous whether or not there is hope that he may still repent.

Here we must be careful in our use of the word “persistent” in describing a false teacher. This word came into use in the Church as an antonym of “inadvertent.” In this connection it has its place, as we have shown above, namely, that the Christian exercise great care before charging a person or groups with heresy, first determining charitably whether it was done unwittingly and inadvertently, or whether the speaker sticks to his error, which is persistence. To say that we must be positive that the errorist intends stubbornly to pursue his course despite all admonition requires an omniscience not granted to mortals. Yet it is mortals who are asked to withdraw from such as teach falsely.

Sooner or later, one who inquires into the questions in which this paper delves will want to examine the Greek verb ὅκοπεῖν (skopein), which expresses the meaning “to watch out for,” as a sentinel on lookout would do. Its usage in Romans 16:17 has been translated in the KJV as “mark” and in the NKJV as “note.” In regard to the meaning of ὅκοπεῖν, Prof. Emeritus Clifford Kuehne commented with unique clarity of style on a WELS-CLC article in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly (WLQ)*:

One of the CLC representatives at the 1987-1990 meetings used the following illustration in an attempt to show the representatives of the WELS and ELS how we understood the skopein (linear present infinitive) and ekkline (aorist imperative): “Each Christmas my wife and I go to Florida to visit our oldest son, who lives there in a mobile home. My wife enjoys doing some housecleaning while we are there and I can almost hear my son saying to his mother as he leaves for work the first day of our visit, ‘Keep your eyes open for cockroaches, and squish them.’ My wife’s continual watching out for the cockroaches would be comparable to the skopein, and the peremptory ‘squish them’ would be comparable to the ekkline.”

In the WELS exegesis of Romans 16:17-18 at the time of the meetings, their essayist in effect carried the process of

admonition into Romans 16:17-18 on the back of skopein from other passages – passages which contain this verb, but which do not deal with false teachers. (He found what he called a “positive slant” in these passages.) This is obviously an exegetical fallacy, namely, to import the content of one passage into another passage which treats of a different topic, justifying this procedure because both of the passages happen to use the same word.⁶

In a paper presented to the WELS Association of Lutheran Educators in 2002 and also contained in a subsequent *CHARIS* article in 2003, the following statements by Dr. Braun should further indicate the extent to which the WELS has gone in contrasting weak brothers and persistent errorists, and in the process doing the very thing against which Prof. Kuehne warned – carrying the process of admonition into Romans 16:17-18.

In the 1950s, when the Wisconsin Synod in its great debate with the Missouri Synod was compelled to reexamine and delineate its fellowship principles more precisely, our synodical fathers wisely recognized the distinction between those who are weak in their understanding of Scripture and willing to receive further instruction, and those who refuse to accept further testimony but cling to unbiblical beliefs and practices. The uniquely WELS nomenclature of *weak brother* and *persistent errorist*, though unfamiliar to most other Christians, accurately reflects Romans 16:17-18. God calls us to separate from those who *habitually* cause divisions and place obstacles in our way that are contrary to the teaching we have learned.

Significantly, the “Essay on Church Fellowship” in the *WELS Doctrinal Statements* of 1970 never mentions one’s denominational membership as the only or even the primary criterion for determining whether someone is a weak Christian or a persistent errorist.... Instead it says, “We can no longer recognize and treat as Christian brethren those who *in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error in doctrine or practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it.*”⁷

Aren’t the floodgates of selective fellowship, if not blatant religious unionism, being opened wide here? That appears to be the

case, as Dr. Braun continues in the same article, speaking from the perspective of what takes place primarily at Wisconsin Lutheran College:

It is not always easy to determine whether a student is a weak Christian or a persistent errorist. Wouldn't it be uncharitable of us automatically to assume that all members of other church bodies are persistent errorists—particularly when their actions reveal they are willing, even eager, to learn more about what we believe? Evangelical practice requires us to consider other factors besides the denominational membership of such people. Assuming that such students are weak Christians, not persistent errorists, we follow the practical implications expressed in the Essay on Fellowship: "Weakness in faith is *not in itself a reason for terminating church fellowship*, but rather *an encouragement for practicing church fellowship more vigorously* to help one another overcome our weakness of faith" (*CHARIS*, 3:1, p. 28, emphasis added by Braun).

Our intent so far has concentrated on reasons why the word "persistent" should be abandoned in setting forth the principles of fellowship and separation. In the quotation and example above we not only see evidence of how the WELS has formally adopted this word in its doctrinal statements; we also see the delaying effect which application of the "persistent errorist" principle will invariably lead. Focusing attention once again on the same doctrinal thesis below, we note that in defining and determining "persistently," a number of criteria have to be met before the command to avoid is applied. Prepared by the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations and included in the 1997 issuance of the *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, the "Theses on Church Fellowship" openly states (with boldface emphasis added by the *Journal*):

We can no longer recognize and treat as Christian brethren those who in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error in doctrine or practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it.

In a paper presented to the CLC's Great Lakes Pastoral Conference in September of 2003, Prof. David Lau, who taught at Immanuel Lutheran Seminary at the time, correctly noted the extra-biblical elements found in this statement:

Notice...the “and” in the WELS statement. It is not enough for the errorist to adhere to an error in doctrine or practice. He must also demand recognition for it and make propaganda for it before fellowship should be terminated. All these additions make it necessary for the group doing the suspending to do more than look at the facts of what is being done and compare them with Scripture. No, the group must also determine whether the errorist is persistent, whether the admonition has been patient enough, and also whether the errorist is demanding recognition for the error (whatever that means) and making propaganda for it. Again, using this criterion will lead to debates as to whether propaganda is being made or not. The CLC confession sticks with the Scriptural criterion and the Scriptural criterion alone: Are the persons in question causing divisions and offenses contrary to Scriptural doctrine?⁸

Application of the “persistent errorist” principle, and its inevitable delay of following the command to separate, apparently has carried over into counsel given to members of other churches who have concerns about the false teaching in those churches and come to WELS churches as inquiring visitors. In the quotation below John F. Brug, professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, expresses as a WELS position what we believe to be, at least in practice, a real and current difference between the WELS and the CLC. In speaking of exceptions to the fellowship principles of Scripture, he states:

When members of another Lutheran synod which is not in fellowship with us are visiting services in a WELS church because they are disturbed by the liberalism in their church and they are considering becoming members of the WELS for confessional reasons, we will encourage them to regard themselves as communicant members of their present church until they have given their testimony against the false teaching of that church, their testimony has been rejected, and they are, therefore, compelled to leave that church.⁹

In other words, the WELS pastor who gives such counsel would be sending the concerned visitor back to the influence of the false teacher – the same false teacher who poses a real danger to that person’s faith and must be avoided according to God’s command.

In distinct contrast, the CLC position and counsel in that same situation would be to urge the concerned visitor to leave the false teaching church immediately, as a safeguard to his own spiritual welfare and in obedience to the Lord's commands "beware of false prophets" and "avoid those who cause divisions and offenses." Any testimony against the false teaching of that church may and should be done, but not as a necessary prerequisite to terminating fellowship – not when that church has already been identified and acknowledged as a false teaching church according to a proper examination of its teaching and practice. In addition, we believe that Scripture "compels" such persons "to leave that church" because of the false teaching proven to be there, not because "their testimony has been rejected."

WELS reaction in dealing with "Church Growth" inroads

Concerned members in the WELS have voiced a very real and informed reaction to the inroads made by the so-called "Church Growth" movement within that synod. One may read some very fine testimony at the "IssuesinWELS" web site. One such paper, authored by WELS Prof. Roger Kuerth to a symposium gathered on September 6, 2005, has the title "The Scriptural Doctrine of the 'Una Sancta': Confessional Implications for Evangelical Lutheran Ministry – and the Doctrine and Practice of Church Fellowship."¹⁰ Prof. Kuerth very ably and convincingly shows the inroads that Reformed pietism has made within the WELS in regard to church growth accomplished outside of the framework of the Word and the Sacraments. But as we read the following paragraphs from that fine assessment, do we not hear the same faulty view advocating the continuation of testimony to the errorists, while maintaining fellowship with them, until one becomes convinced that they are persistent and that more testimony would be of no further avail? Are not these concerned Christians hindered by operating with the same "persistent" *conditio sine qua non*¹¹ baggage with which their forefathers have saddled them? These are a few pertinent paragraphs (emphasis made by Prof. Kuerth):

It is my firm belief, and the firm belief of others in our synod, based on what we have been able to read and hear of late (and believe me when I say we are troubled by some of

what we read and hear), that many of the same pietistic principles, practices and problems that have plagued the Lutheran Church in the past have slowly begun to creep back in and plague the Lutheran Church, yes, our beloved WELS. The same or similar *schwärmerisch* arguments and fanatical objections that were once being heard in the church from the lips of men like Melanchthon and the Philippists, Spener and the Pietists, Wesley and the Methodists, Arminius and the Arminians, Zinzendorf and the Moravians, Francke and the University of Halle, the “international center of Pietism,” appear now to be heard once again from the lips of very sincere, but very misguided brothers within our own midst. If this is really the case and not just a misunderstanding or misreading of the facts, then our debt of love to them demands NOT that we ignore them, despise them, slander them, nor reject them as brothers – but that we WITNESS to them, INSTRUCT them, HUMBLY and PATIENTLY BEAR WITH THEM, and “Make every effort to preserve the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace!”

But, finally, all such fraternal efforts CAN, and at some point, MUST come to an end. And should it become obvious, after patient, loving instruction and repeated admonition, that all such fraternal efforts have finally borne no fruit and failed to unite us on the formal principle of the Evangelical Lutheran Church which is Scripture alone, then God’s Word demands that we who still revere and take seriously that sacred formal principle of Lutheranism, as a matter of confessional principle, regardless of number, name or position, “mark and avoid” them as “false brothers” and “persistent errorists,” just as our forefathers did in the past when they were confronted by the stark reality of false doctrine, division, heresy, and sinful unionism of their own day.

To withhold or break fellowship because of non-doctrinal differences is the sin of separatism. Equally serious is the sin of unionism. This is an agreement to disagree, practicing fellowship without agreement in doctrine. Scripture demands that we separate from errorists. But let us also not hesitate to speak and contend for the truth when it becomes necessary to do so!

Another example to consider has occurred more recently, as we learn from announcements made on behalf of The CHARIS Institute. The CHARIS Institute, Inc., which serves as an arm of the WELS Wisconsin Lutheran College in Milwaukee, had set up a March 2006 conference advocating Church Growth methods and principles, which was to include speakers who were not only outside of WELS fellowship, but were also deniers of many cardinal truths of Scripture.¹² A visit to the CHARIS web site yielded these explanatory paragraphs as to why the proposed meeting was cancelled. One has the reasonable suspicion that the host organization has not given up for very long its plans either to push for future Church Growth principle symposiums or to invite heterodox speakers. Posted on the “charis.wlc.edu” site and also announced in *CHARIS*, 5:1, on p. 39, we find the following, which begins with the headline “Church Door Symposium Cancelled!”:

Due to the brotherly concerns expressed by numerous clergy and Synod officials around the issue of church fellowship, the 3rd Annual Church Door Symposium has been cancelled. Although the Executive Director and the members of the CHARIS Board of Directors disagree with the judgments that hosting non-WELS speakers represents a violation of Scripture and WELS doctrine, concern for maintaining harmony in the church, coupled with concern for the continued success and vitality of CHARIS and Wisconsin Lutheran College, override any reasons for taking a stand on this issue at this time.

It is an unfortunate fact that great confusion exists among clergy and laity alike around applications of the church fellowship principles. Rather than contribute to this confusion, the leaders of The CHARIS Institute have decided to cancel this year’s symposium. Our prayer is that we will find a way to resolve this confusion about church fellowship so that CHARIS can again host outstanding scholars on relevant subjects in the future without controversy.

WELS counsel in dealing with members of heterodox churches

This article has only scratched the surface in attempting to demonstrate how pervasively the faulty principle of “persistence”

has infected WELS doctrine and practice in regard to fellowship and separation. Well over a hundred (often conflicting) examples, on public display online, can demonstrate how WELS leaders continually struggle to fit “persistence” into applications of their fellowship principles. One can visit the site “wels.net,” go to the “Q & A” link, type “persistent errorist” in the search box and read the numerous inquiries answered by a WELS spokesman. The following is one example, not necessarily the worst, chosen at random. The answer quoted from the “wels.net” Q & A link is given in response to this two-part question: “If one of your family members or a friend had recently found a relationship/salvation through Jesus and they started going to a Baptist church, would you still rejoice with them over Jesus as their Savior or tell them they had joined a cult no matter their beliefs on Jesus. Do WELS members think they are the only true Christians?”

A: Thank you for your questions. I invite you to continue to read archived questions and answers, since your questions are answered many times in previous correspondence. I also invite and encourage you to sit down with one of our pastors and ask the same questions. It appears you do not understand what the Bible principles of church fellowship mean or what they do not mean. And I wish you well as you ponder Bible-revealed truths.

We do believe and teach that God forbids his people to express fellowship with those who willfully and persistently cling to error or false teaching.

If a family member or friend – or anyone we know about – recently was brought to know Jesus as his Savior, we would rejoice with him, encourage him, and pledge ourselves to help him grow in his faith and Bible knowledge. If he began to attend a church that does not share our doctrinal confession, we would strive to determine if he does this as a result of ignorance or weakness in understanding and if he is open to continued study of Scripture on the subject. If so, we would not forbid expressions of fellowship with him (especially in private, to avoid giving others a wrong impression or causing them to stumble because we might appear to be ignoring his public confession). Our goal, in love, is to instruct, strengthen, and foster his grasp on the truth and to

lead him to reject all error.

If acceptance or toleration of false doctrine continues despite adequate instruction and after pertinent Bible testimony is patiently brought to him, we would consider him a willful or persistent errorist, and we are not allowed by God to ignore that and express church fellowship with him. We must testify against any and all error as sin against God and a danger to souls. And we do this even if there is evidence that the errorist continues to profess Christ as Savior and Redeemer. Christian fellowship may graciously be maintained by the Holy Spirit, but expressions of that fellowship are not allowed by the same Spirit under these circumstances. So we would continue to give thanks that there is evidence the person is embracing the gospel of Jesus Christ, but would grieve over the mixture of truth with error in his public confession.

Finally, we do not use the term "cult" when referring to other Christian churches and we do not think we are the "only true Christians."

Although the questioner above is obviously confused about biblical principles of fellowship, the confusion must have been compounded by the responder, who attempts to fit an answer into the "willful" and "persistent" mold with which the WELS has saddled him. He concludes that the hypothetical convert, while attending a Baptist church, can be fellowshipped with as long as one's subjective judgment evaluates his heterodox involvement to be the "result of ignorance or weakness in understanding." He attempts to cover his tracks, however, by advising that one should keep any such expressions of fellowship private, so as not to give others a "wrong impression." Even worse, he further reinforces the WELS teaching and practice that patient instruction and testimony must enter the process, which in effect take the place of the simple command to *watch out for* (skopein) individuals or groups *who cause divisions and offenses*. Meanwhile, fellowship with the heterodox continues until one decides that the instruction and testimony have been adequate and patient enough and that the adherence to error has nevertheless continued. By this time we start to wonder if the questioner or the hypothetical Baptist can possibly know which end is up.

It is truly difficult for this writer (and perhaps the readers too) to believe that the WELS fellowship doctrine and practice have really become that corrupted since the false teaching developed in the 1950s and 1960s. But the leaven spreading throughout the lump of dough, we believe, cannot be denied.

Some reflections, conclusions and projections

Was the term “persistent” originally added as necessary to ensure that an errorist (or erring church body) was given, on the basis of human judgment, adequate time to give an unequivocal answer to such grave charges? It is difficult to answer precisely. We do submit, however, that the added term “persistent,” along with all other synonymous expressions employed in WELS usage, has proven to be a “red herring,” a distraction which historically and also currently has led to unscriptural delays, for in effect it has injected invalid human judgment into the identifying process before the action which Scripture calls for can take place.

Permit some personal reflection on a painful but necessary withdrawal from my former church body. When some of my immediate siblings consulted their WELS pastors regarding the withdrawal of me and others from the WELS and the Synodical Conference in the late 1950s and early 1960s, we believe it was a “cheap shot” for those pastors so contacted to reply simply that so-and-so had “jumped the gun.” Thus the point at which separation with the LCMS must take place was rather crassly relegated to the subjective backwaters of mere human judgment. And all those who withdrew with heavy hearts and for sake of conscience were branded with a cheap label – not as those who were given the grace to perceive and address an unscriptural position by being obedient to God’s directive to “avoid them,” but as those who were simply impatient with the process of determining “persistence.”

Putting the current WELS fellowship doctrine and practice to the test, some questions need to be asked, which may only be answered as the future unfolds. Is a person to be considered no longer responsible for the public confession of the church body in which he holds membership? Is such responsibility merely an outmoded concept, which simply does not fit the times and needs today? Must we endeavor from now on to judge hearts – what we perceive

as “weakness of faith” – in order to identify a Christian with whom we should then vigorously practice all forms of fellowship? If that is to be the case, should such fellowship not also include Open Communion? Can WELS members now fellowship with any and all people who are not persistent errorists, but merely by their willingness to listen are to be considered weak Christians with whom all forms of fellowship should be practiced all the more vigorously? Though we are to be ready to give an answer, with meekness and fear, to all who ask us about the reason for the hope within us (1 Pet. 3:15), at what point does our willingness and even eagerness to instruct any who come to us interfere in another man’s Christian ministry? Will there not be the real danger of gross proselytizing and even the danger of tampering with the doctrine of the divine call? We doubt that any among our fellowship are ready to rewrite those parts of section VI in our *CLC Statement of Faith and Purpose* which publicly, and in stark contrast to the confusion existing in the WELS, state:

4. We are indeed edified and heartened by every testimony, written or spoken, which truly confesses, teaches, preaches and glorifies the Gospel of Christ. But we reject and condemn the false ecumenism which would require us to make common cause in worship and church work with those who, while claiming the Christian name, or even the Lutheran name, publicly adhere to that which contradicts God’s clear Word in whole or in part. We equally condemn separation – that is, a schismatic withdrawal from others for a reason or purpose not in accord with God’s revealed Will.

5. We do not deny, but joyfully acknowledge that the Lord knows His elect, even though some are unwitting captives in false-teaching churches where, by their membership, they are partaking of a confession of error and are subjected to grave spiritual danger. We pray that all who now truly believe may persevere in that faith to the end and thus obtain everlasting life.

It is not with “I-told-you-so” satisfaction that we witness a once cherished fellowship continuing to endanger itself by a process that abandons the Lord’s way of warding off causes of divisions and offenses, thus safeguarding His flock in the one true faith. Still, we wonder how far the yeast of “persistence” has

spread throughout the whole batch of dough; we wonder what other doctrines have been affected by its influence. Some within the WELS are in protest against the pan-Lutheran activities of Thrivent, in which by their membership they support that fraternal benefit society's churchly function of rather lavishly funding ELCA pastors and projects and supporting not only Church Growth principles, but gay causes, the ordination of women, abortion rights, etc. One hears of strong voices within the WELS advocating women's roles in pastoral functions. And as reported in a recent *CHARIS* announcement, "it is an unfortunate fact that great confusion exists among clergy and laity alike around applications of the church fellowship principles." Indeed, a cousin of mine in the WELS pastoral ministry decries what he deems to be missing in his synod's current fellowship discussions:

Other arguments have been made as well, but virtually all of them limit the doctrine of fellowship merely to guarding against being led astray by false teaching. That is a part of the doctrine which can be stated as concern for our own faith. We ourselves have a love for the word and desire to remain strong in faith. Therefore we need to be careful of false teaching.

There are however at least two other concerns that no one I have read has mentioned. The first has to do with love for the false teacher, who is also a blood bought soul. The loving thing that the doctrine of fellowship leads us to do is to avoid him so that the trumpet gives a clear sound. It tells him: You are endangering your own faith by your false teaching. We will avoid you and your teaching out of love for you so that you will realize how serious your departure from God's word is. It is serious enough to keep us from having fellowship together.

The second issue that no one is mentioning is the love that the doctrine of fellowship leads us to show to those who would sit at the feet of the false teacher. Our avoidance of him says to them: This man is a false teacher. Keep away from him. Do not sit at his feet.¹³

As with the preceding quote, we may recognize forces at work within the WELS to return to the *old paths*. One can search "The Motley Magpie.org" and "Issuesinwels.org" and "wels.net" or sim-

ply Google “protesting fellowship” for such evidence, with ongoing updates. Some of my relatives are WELS pastors involved with questioning the “Church Growth” movement. May our Lord lead them, as well as many others, away from the pitfalls of being forever the dissenting minority, as in the case of the so-called “conservatives” within the LCMS. They continue on and on, trying to turn around a lost cause by testifying from within the building which is burning out of control, instead of being personally obedient to the directives of Scripture to get out of the burning building.

Thus says the Lord: “Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; then you will find rest for your souls. But they said, ‘We will not walk in it.’ Also, I set watchmen over you, saying, ‘Listen to the sound of the trumpet! But they said, ‘We will not listen’” (Jer. 6:16-17).

During my ministry I have been privileged to instruct many adults with the course “Learn From Me,” which is now available on the CLC web site. When it came to the topic of our fellowship practices, one woman terminated her instructions with an exasperated outburst: “I can’t stand being so fenced in!” I was filled with recriminations to the charge of being a possible contributor to her cancellation of classes. And I trust that I have been forgiven for any lack of evangelical applications. But the more one thinks about it, the more one may appreciate the woman’s assessment that the separation principle in the doctrine of church fellowship results in some intentional, protective “fencing” for the sheep of His pasture. Our Lord “fences us in” with the fellowship doctrine to keep us in the green pastures of His pure Word and Sacraments. Thus He protects us from the poisonous weeds of false teachers, who are sent by the “roaring lion,” and as we are warned, these may appear as “angels of light,” even within one’s own visible fellowship.

If the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle? (1 Cor. 14:8). May the “red herring” of “persistence,” as well as any other words and phrases being used as reasons for delaying an action which simple obedience to the Word of God commands, be forever expunged from identifying and taking action over against false teachers and errorists.

Endnotes

¹ Pastor Emeritus Bertram Naumann presented the original material of this article as a regional pastoral conference paper in the spring of 2006. Editorial revisions have been made with his permission.

² As an example consider the following excerpt from Prof. John Pfeiffer's review of the book *A Tale of Two Synods* (cf. *Journal of Theology*, 44:1, March 2004, p. 51):

A word should be said about the use of the expression "persistent errorist," an expression which Prof. Braun uses repeatedly in his book and which is used repeatedly in WELS' publications. In light of the history of the WELS since 1958, it would be a mistake to think that the term "errorist" refers to a weak brother who has fallen into error, while the expression "persistent errorist" refers to a false teacher. Prior to 1958 this may have been the intent of those who used this expression. However, official declarations and convention resolutions, as well as official practice, have shown that this is no longer the meaning of this expression.

Since Wisconsin adopted its new doctrine on fellowship, the use of the word "persistent" has taken on a new significance. This term is used to describe the kind of false teacher that one should avoid. In the "mouth" of Wisconsin, the expression "persistent errorist" has come to mean "a false teacher who is adjudged to be rejecting admonition." In contrast, an "errorist" would be "a false teacher who continues to listen to admonition" [Formulation of definitions mine – JP]. Under such definitions, one can continue in fellowship with an errorist (false teacher), but not with a persistent errorist (recalcitrant false teacher).

³ In correspondence to Bertram Naumann, Pastor Fleischer also wrote, "I agree that the word 'persistence' is a weasel word.... For me it is simple. We do not need the word. We do not call an erring teacher an errorist until we have indeed ascertained the situation through testing, etc. Once it is determined that he is not misspeaking or not misunderstanding, but is teaching and is defending his error, he is an errorist. Persistence has nothing to do with it. To me the expression 'persistent errorist' is a redundancy...."

⁴ CHARIS describes itself as a quarterly journal published by

The CHARIS Institute, Inc., which is affiliated with and located on the campus of Wisconsin Lutheran College. Also, within the Braun quotation words enclosed in brackets are provided by Pastor Naumann for the sake of clarification.

⁵ Wisconsin Lutheran College is a four-year liberal arts college affiliated with the WELS and located in Milwaukee. The non-member choir policy is mentioned and defended in the article quoted from *CHARIS*, Lent 2005, 4:2, p. 33, with emphasis indicated in italics by Mark Braun and John E. Bauer.

⁶ Prof. Kuehne's recollections and comments, expressed in an E-mail on January 29, 2001, came about in reaction to the article "The WELS and the CLC: Is There a Doctrinal Difference?" (John F. Brug, *WLQ*, Winter 2001, 98:1, pp. 62-67).

⁷ "It's a Different World—Or Is It?" *CHARIS*, Fall 2003, 3:1, pp. 27-28, emphasis added by Mark Braun.

⁸ David Lau's assessment can be found in his conference paper "Evaluation of Recent (1990 and Following) Statements of the Wisconsin Lutheran Synod (WELS) on Fellowship."

⁹ John F. Brug, "Can There Ever Be Exceptions to Our Regular Fellowship Practices that Do Not Violate Scripture's Fellowship Principles?" Part I, *WLQ*, Summer 2002, 99:3, p. 168. With Pastor Naumann's permission the editor has added the quoted *WLQ* material and its subsequent evaluation to this article.

¹⁰ The "Study Papers" link on the "IssuesinWELS.org" web site, from which the quoted material was obtained, has the opening disclaimer: "The following papers were presented for discussion. The papers in so far as they contain analysis of the issues, are not to be construed as position statements of the group as a whole."

¹¹ Latin for the *condition without which not*, i.e., the necessary condition for something.

¹² According to an announcement made in *CHARIS*, 4:4, on p. 21, the three keynote speakers were going to be Dr. Aubrey Malphurs, a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary and president of Vision Ministries International; Dr. Kent Hunter, a church consultant and pastor in the LCMS; and Dr. Waldo Weming, a retired LCMS pastor and author.

¹³ This quotation from the editorial "Things to Consider about False Teachers" can be found on the "Points of View" link of the "IssuesinWELS.org" website.