



2330

Church of the Lutheran Confession

==== P A N O R A M A ====

Commentary on a Convention Resolution

David Lau

The 1992 convention of the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) passed the following resolution concerning meetings with representatives of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS):

"After reviewing the work the Board of Doctrine and the president have done for us in their correspondence with representatives of the WELS and ELS during the past two years, we come to the following conclusions:

"1) We affirm that ever since the formation of the CLC in 1960 there has been a doctrinal difference between the CLC and the WELS/ELS on the matter of termination of fellowship with church bodies that have become causers of divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, cf. Romans 16:17-18.

"2) We are convinced by Scripture (Gal. 5:9; 1 Thess. 5:21-22) that in order to resolve doctrinal differences it is necessary that previous official false statements and actions be clearly rejected. This conviction is reinforced by a study of church history.

"3) Since in the correspondence of the past biennium the representatives of the WELS/ELS have refused up to this point to acknowledge that this difference which separates us is a matter of doctrine, we urge the Board of Doctrine to terminate the present discussions with the representatives of the WELS/ELS, unless such discussions address this specific doctrinal difference from the outset.

"4) We encourage all members of the CLC to study the CLC 'Theses and Antitheses on the Role of Admonition in the Termination of Fellowship with Church Bodies' (Revised by the CLC Board of Doctrine, February 1990), and to re-study the pamphlet entitled 'There Is Still a Difference' (1982), in order to gain a better understanding of this doctrinal difference.

"5) We thank our Lord for giving us the opportunity both to study God's Word and to give testimony in this area of the doctrine of church fellowship. We pray that the Holy

Spirit will use His Word and this testimony to accomplish His will to the glory of God and His saving Gospel."

What is the doctrinal difference between the CLC, on the one hand, and the WELS/ELS, on the other hand? Those who left the WELS in the years and months before the WELS 1959 convention did not leave the WELS because of a stated different doctrinal principle. At that time both sides still seemed to hold (in theory, at least) the same principle: namely, that church bodies ought to be avoided when they are causing divisions and offenses contrary to Scriptural doctrine, according to Romans 16:17-18. Those who left the WELS before the 1959 WELS convention felt conscience-bound to do so because the WELS was not following this principle. That is, the WELS was not avoiding a church body—the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LC-MS)—that they had publicly declared (at the 1955 WELS convention) to be guilty of causing divisions and offenses. If the WELS had then corrected itself in 1959 by obeying God's Word in Romans 16:17-18, it is possible that those who felt conscience-bound to leave the WELS would have returned to it, since the principle that both groups accepted was now being obeyed.

But what happened is that the WELS convention of 1959 did not correct its earlier disobedience of God's Word, but rather it justified that disobedience by adopting a different principle on the termination of church fellowship, namely, that "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." According to this new principle the WELS was not sinning by its continuing fellowship with the LC-MS. According to this new principle continuing fellowship was in order because admonition was still being carried out and the WELS was not yet convinced that its admonition was of no avail.

When the CLC was organized in August of 1960, it adopted *Concerning Church Fellowship* as its statement of doctrine on matters of fellowship. In this document the WELS statement of 1959 was declared to be a false principle, a false doctrine, if you will, on the matter of termination of fellowship. "We further reject the teaching that errorists and their followers are to be avoided only when they no longer listen to admonition, or that we are to remain in fellowship with er-

rorists as long as we think that there is hope that they might give up their errors. Though the teaching Church is ever an admonishing Church, we reject the opinion that separation from errorists is dependent upon the course of admonition."

The correct principle was spelled out in these words: "We further believe and teach that suspension of an established fellowship is to take place when it has been ascertained that a person or group is causing divisions and offenses through a false position in doctrine or practice."

Those who left the WELS after 1959 to form the CLC did so because, in their opinion, the WELS had become a heterodox or false-teaching church body because it had adopted a false principle on termination of fellowship.

Ever since 1959 there has been this doctrinal difference. Print the two statements on termination of fellowship side by side, and it is easy to see that there is a difference between them, and that this difference is a difference in teaching. We teach officially (in *Concerning Church Fellowship*) that God's Word tells us to follow a certain principle on termination. The WELS teaches officially (on the basis of its 1959 resolution which has never been rescinded) that God's Word tells them to follow a different principle.

In 1961 the WELS did, indeed, suspend or terminate fellowship with the LC-MS. But on what basis was this suspension approved? On the basis of the CLC principle, or on the basis of the WELS principle? I was present at that 1961 WELS convention, and it was evident that the resolution to terminate fellowship was made, as we might expect, on the basis of the principle adopted by the WELS in 1959.

That is why the WELS decision to terminate fellowship with the LC-MS did not in itself correct the false teaching on termination of fellowship. In the meetings that took place between the CLC and the WELS in the sixties this doctrinal difference was never resolved. Neither side was willing to acknowledge that its principle was incorrect.

In the eighties another generation took up the question of the historical difference between the CLC and the WELS. This time the ELS was also included in the discussions. Our CLC representatives entered in on these discussions, thinking that perhaps the difference in doctrine could be resolved on the basis of a fresh study of the Scripture passages. Papers were presented by both sides. There seemed to be hope for real progress. In fact, subcommittees had gone so far as to agree on a joint state-

ment of doctrine.

But then came the question of a preamble. To us it was self-evident that the joint statement must be presented as a settlement of doctrinal difference. If there was a doctrinal difference that was now being resolved, the preamble should declare what the difference was that was now being resolved. All previous statements that contradicted the joint statement must of course now be declared false.

But at this point in the discussions there came a letter from the WELS commission chairman that indicated a totally different understanding on their part of what these discussions were all about. The letter stated: "We do not believe there was a real difference between us in doctrine" (letter of August 8, 1990, from the Chairman of the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations). I suppose it is not altogether preposterous for some to believe that all of us who left the WELS to form the CLC did so on the basis of a mere misunderstanding, rather than a doctrinal difference. But our committee and our convention wanted to make as clear as we could our solemn and sincere conviction, based on God's Word and the facts of our history, that our difference with the WELS/ELS has been, and is now, "a doctrinal difference." This, of course, implies that one side or both sides in the controversy have been guilty of false teaching. If we can agree on what is true and what is false, and if we are sincere in what we say, then it follows that we will want to correct and eradicate that which is false, no matter who said it or did it, so that from this point on we can work together in the Gospel on the basis of God's clear Word.

In our opinion the *Theses and Antitheses on the Role of Admonition in the Termination of Fellowship with Church Bodies* (revised by the CLC Board of Doctrine in February of 1990) are an adequate statement of what is true and false in these matters, and we print them here so that all our readers can know where we stand. Note that III.A is a rejection of the position taken by the WELS and III.B is a rejection of the position taken by the ELS.

CLC THESES AND ANTITHESES ON THE ROLE OF ADMONITION IN THE TERMINATION OF FELLOWSHIP WITH CHURCH BODIES

Romans 16:17-18 has always been considered a *sedes doctrinae* among us. We affirm that this passage is a word of God which teaches clearly the separation principle. We

herewith set forth that which we affirm and believe, as well as that which we reject, with regard to the role of admonition in the termination of fellowship with church bodies.

- I. We regard fraternal (in-fellowship) admonition as a continuing function of Christian love among brethren in the exercise of their fellowship relations, also and particularly when there is concern that brethren may have strayed into error. (Compare Ezekiel 33:1-9; Romans 15:1-14; Ephesians 4:1-6; Colossians 3:12-17; 2 Timothy 4:2.) Such admonition directed to a sister church body and the response thereto play a proper role in ascertaining whether that synod has the status of weak brethren or whether it is causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of God's Word.

We repudiate any application of Romans 16:17-18 to those brethren who have misspoken or inadvertently erred, or to those who have the status of weak brethren. In the case of all such, Christian love teaches us rather to "reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Timothy 4:2).

- II. The *skopein* ("keep on watching out for") of Romans 16:17 is an activity whereby believers in Christ are to be constantly alert for those who are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of God's Word.

We do not believe that *skopein* in the context of Romans 16:17 specifically and directly enjoins admonition. This does not deny that admonition, as enjoined in other passages of Scripture, will normally take place concurrently with the watchfulness that is implicit in the *skopein*.

- III. When it has been ascertained that a church body is causing (*tous poiountas*) divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of Holy Scripture, the directive to avoid is as binding as any word addressed to us by our Savior God in Holy Scripture. The apostle's

peremptory *ekklisiate* ("avoid") is the voice of the Good Shepherd Himself, as He lovingly protects His sheep and lambs from the deception of error and as He graciously gives warning to the false teacher. Continuing in fellowship for any reason with those who are causing divisions and offenses exposes Christians to the dangerous leaven of error, which is contrary to the Lord's saving intent. Romans 16:17-18.

- A. We reject any interpretation of Romans 16:17-18 which, in the name of Christian love, would make the avoiding of causers of divisions and offenses contingent upon the subjective judgment that admonition is of no further avail and that an impasse has thereby been reached.
- B. We also reject any interpretation of Romans 16:17-18 which in effect states 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.

Revised by CLC Board of Doctrine
February 1, 1990

Our 1992 CLC convention declared itself in point #2 as follows: "In order to resolve doctrinal differences it is necessary that previous official false statements and actions be clearly rejected." False teaching is the leaven of which Paul says in Galatians 5:9: "A little leaven leavens the whole lump." Even a little false teaching is dangerous. In the Old Testament every last bit of leaven had to be removed for a proper celebration of the Passover. So also we need to keep on removing the smallest leaven of false doctrine and false practice from our lives, lest it grow and we find ourselves eventually losing God's saving Gospel. False teaching spreads.

There is evidence that the leaven introduced into the WELS and ELS in the fifties has spread. For example, the false principle of termination of fellowship was presented in the *Wiscon-*

sin Lutheran Quarterly (Winter 1989) in connection with the report of the 1988 convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (ELFK) in East Germany. This convention passed some very strong resolutions. For example: "We hold firmly to the position that Holy Scripture demands of us a clear confession of the truth and a total rejection of all false teaching or toleration of it. Hence we reject all practice of worship and church fellowship with those who persistently teach or tolerate some other doctrine." With the exception of the word "persistently" that can be understood in agreement with the false WELS principle of 1959, we would agree this is a very strong statement in agreement with God's Word. But that same convention of the ELFK made this declaration with reference to its continuing fellowship with the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK): "Because the far-reaching differences in doctrine and practice between our churches continue undiminished, because also through correspondence and discussions the disagreement between us has until now not been able to be removed, and because the SELK *Kirchenleitung* leaves open if and when binding discussions about the disputed doctrinal questions will continue, we can to our regret continue in church fellowship only under protest. . . . Because of our burdened consciences this state of protest can continue only for a limited time. Before making a decision, however, we still want to wait until the 1989 SELK General Pastoral Conference."

Does it not seem that the leaven of the WELS/ELS principle on termination of church fellowship is in evidence here? When we are sure that divisions and offenses are being caused contrary to Bible teaching, why should there be any delay in avoiding the errorists? Is it because we do not yet know whether they are "persistent"? Is it because we do not know how they are going to react to our continued admonition? If CLC representatives rather than WELS representatives had been present at this ELFK convention, would we not have had to advise the ELFK to terminate fellowship with the SELK at once on the basis of Romans 16:17-18? Is this not what God tells us to do in Scripture? When different principles are followed, different actions result.

How can the CLC and WELS/ELS possibly work together in the future unless there is a clear rejection of that which is false? So let us do what the apostle tells us to do in First Thessalonians 5:21-22: "Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil." If we are in agreement

on what is true and what is false, then we can test various declarations, resolutions, and actions of the past on the basis of our agreement in Scripture. We can hold to what is good and reject what is false, regardless of who was responsible for what was good or what was false. We should not be interested in saving face or preserving someone's reputation when the truth is at stake.

"This conviction is reinforced by a study of church history." The *Formula of Concord* clearly rejected various statements made by prominent theologians. I don't think Luther was condemned for any statement he made, but many statements of his associates were condemned, statements of Melancthon, Amsdorf, Agricola, Flacius, and others. Their names were not mentioned specifically in the document, but their erroneous statements were clearly rejected. Even some statements of the old church fathers that had been used in support of false teaching were condemned as false. Such a clear rejection of previous false statements has certainly proved to be a blessing to our church.

On the other hand, how damaging it was to the church when the infamous Chicago statement of the forty-four LC-MS theologians in 1945 was allowed to do its work as a leaven without ever being rejected or its authors disciplined! The statement was withdrawn but not rejected, and it is still working as a pernicious leaven even to the present day. This statement insisted that Romans 16:17-18 should not be applied to false-teaching Lutheran church bodies.

As another example, consider the Common Confession of 1950 that was supposedly a doctrinal settlement of the differences between the LC-MS and the American Lutheran Church (ALC). The WELS and the ELS at the time rejected the Common Confession as inadequate. It failed because it did not clearly reject the false statements of the past. Why should we want to repeat this same mistake in the nineties?

Therefore we cannot totally agree with the statement of the WELS commission chairman when he writes: "We do not wish to sit in judgment on people who did what they did in all good conscience in that time of confusion" (letter of August 8, 1990) or the statement of the WELS president when he writes: "We did not want to sit in judgment on those who preceded us" (letter of February 17, 1992). We, of course, dare not sit in judgment on any person's motives or state of faith, but we can and should judge the official statements of a church body to determine whether they can stand in agreement with Scripture or whether

they need to be rejected. The leaven of error needs to be removed. (Cf. J. Lau, "Voices from the Past," *Journal of Theology*, March 1992, pp. 31-42.)

Our CLC convention floor committee on doctrine held an open meeting at the convention to give our delegates and visitors a chance to express themselves on our discussions with the WELS/ELS representatives. Over and over again we were warned to be very careful. The thought was expressed by more than one that the WELS and ELS are not the church bodies they used to be. Apparently the leaven of error has been working through these many years since 1959.

We believe, for example, that cooperation with fraternal insurance agencies such as AAL and Lutheran Brotherhood, from which we in the CLC barely escaped by God's grace, seems to be involving the WELS and ELS more and more in seminars and meetings and projects of various kinds that seem to go beyond mere cooperation in externals with false-teaching church bodies. (Cf. J. Lau, "What is Going On?" *Journal of Theology*, December 1991, and "What is Going On? (Revisited)," March 1992.) Pastor Gregory Jackson of the WELS has been warning his fellow-members concerning the church growth movement, which he suggests has been adversely influencing some WELS pastors and congregations. (Cf. his conference paper of April 27-28, 1992, publicized in *Christian News*.)

We have pastors and members in our CLC congregations who have left the WELS or ELS in recent years because of wrong positions taken by their synods or their congregations in various matters. These people have been happy to find agreement with the CLC in doctrine and practice. They tell us that in recent years the WELS and ELS have changed for the worse, and that we need to be on our guard. Many of them feel that protracted discussions with church bodies that deny that there are any doctrinal differences between themselves and us will tend to weaken our convictions and doctrinal position.

For all of the above reasons our committee proposed and the convention accepted the five points of our report printed at the beginning of this article. We conclude by repeating #5: "We thank our Lord for giving us the opportunity both to study God's Word and to give testimony in this area of the doctrine of church fellowship. We pray that the Holy Spirit will use His Word and this testimony to accomplish His will to the glory of God and His saving Gospel."



