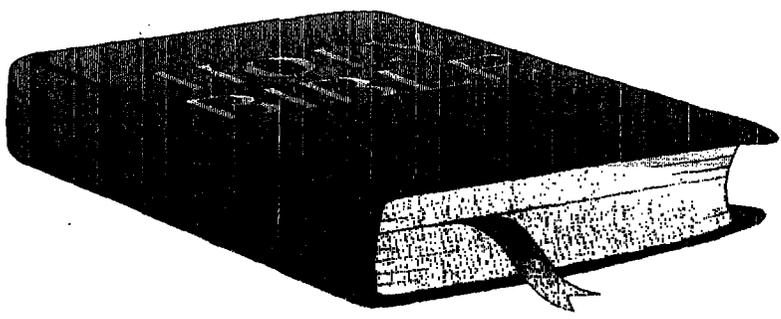
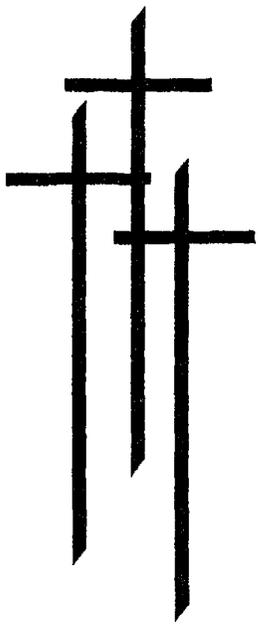


1048

WELS-ELS and the CLC



1048

WELS-ELS and the CLC

We confess with the Formula of Concord (Article XI): "We have no intention of yielding aught of the eternal, immutable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquility and unity (which, moreover, is not in our power to do). Nor would such peace and unity, since it is devised against the truth and for its suppression, have any permanency. Still less are we inclined to adorn and conceal a corruption of the pure doctrine and manifest, condemned errors. But we entertain heartfelt pleasure and love for, and are on our part sincerely inclined and anxious to advance, that unity according to our utmost power, by which His glory remains to God uninjured, nothing of the divine truth of the holy Gospel is surrendered, no room is given to the least error, poor sinners are brought to true, genuine repentance, raised up by faith, confirmed in new obedience, and thus justified and eternally saved alone through the sole merit of Christ."

We have maintained that there has been a doctrinal difference between WELS-ELS and the CLC since 1959 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" (Romans 16:17,18), yet WELS-ELS have been publicly declaring that there is no such doctrinal difference.

Romans 16:17 "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. 18 For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. 19 For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil. 20 And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen."

Whom are we to "note"? Those who "cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine we have learned." This "noting" is used of a scout watching for the enemy. It refers to a constant and careful

observing. But note that the focus of this watching is those who are teaching false doctrine, that is, actual causers of divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine, not potential causers. It is inappropriate to jump to Romans 16 when dealing with a weak brother, a misunderstanding, or an unintentional mistake. Other passages apply to such a situation (Galatians 6:1). It is inappropriate to attack the clarity of Scripture by maintaining that God's Word gives us two different principles to apply to a situation. God's Word does not leave us in a dilemma whether we should apply Matthew 18:15-18 or Romans 16:17,18.

What are these "divisions"? John 8:31 demonstrates that continuing in Jesus' Word reveals our Spirit-created unity with Jesus and His disciples. Not continuing in Jesus' Word divides that unity.

What are these "offenses"? Anything that may snare someone in sin, cause him to stumble in his faith, or in anyway harm his faith.

What is the basis for determining whom we are to "avoid"? The doctrine, that is, the teaching of God's Word.

When are we to avoid? As soon as a Christian recognizes that an individual or a group is causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine we have learned (teaching contrary to God's Word), we are to avoid. WELS-ELS have accused us of remaining separate purely on a question of timing. This is not the case at all. The difference is not over timing but rather over what God's Word teaches about this "noting" and "avoiding."

What does it mean to "avoid"? This is the antithesis of "greet," occurring 16 times in the previous verses. Here there is to be no fraternal greeting, no spiritual fellowship, but a complete turning away from any connection to false teaching. It is a decisive action that calls for a clean break and does not continue to play with evil.

What does the "serve their own belly" mean? Sometimes this phrase is used to limit the application of these verses to manifestly unchristian false teachers. But the Judaizers whom Paul dealt with often as false teachers claimed to be super Christians. And the

context warns about the danger of deception. Further, the "for" in v. 18 demonstrates that this verse is neither telling us how to identify false teachers nor how to deal with the false teachers, but providing reasons for this decisive action. Teaching contrary to Jesus' Word is being a slave to one or more of man's many selfish interests. Every such following of man's reasons and interest is a deceptive snare to the simple. And v. 19 demonstrates that every believer ought to be "simple" concerning evil.

But in its 1959 Convention WELS officially stated its position to be (p.210): "Termination of church fellowship is called for when you have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail [profit] and that the erring brother or church body demands recognition for their error."

This statement is contrary to Scripture on at least three points. 1) It bases the decision and action on human judgment and conviction rather than obedience to God's Word. Already in 1955 the WELS convention reached a unanimous conclusion that "LCMS has created divisions and offenses (Rom. 16:17) by persistent adherence to false doctrine and practice." However, they voted not to avoid. The Post Convention News Bulletin said that there is an "Honest difference of opinion on whether it is necessary to break." There were all kinds of excuses: debt of love, confusion, and concern for the weak in the other church body. 2) It bases the decision and action on a judgment about the future rather than an objective recognition of what is occurring. 3) It requires that the false teacher demand recognition for his error rather than the fact that he is teaching it.

Professor Kuehne illustrated the truth of Romans 16:17 very well with this example. They were visiting their son in Florida. When he left for work he said, "Keep your eyes open for cockroaches and squash them." The meaning is simple. If you see something moving, look closer and see that it is indeed a cockroach, then squash it. The intent was clearly not that when you have already discerned that it is a cockroach that you all take a vote to determine if it is, attempt to talk him out of being a cockroach, wonder whether he will always remain a cockroach, nor leave him alone if

he will not insist on being recognized as a cockroach even though he continues being one.

I like a similar illustration. If you are walking in the woods enjoying the wildlife and hear a rustling in the bushes, you will indeed look closer. At first glimpse of the animal's face you may think, "how cute." But when you see more and recognize a very distinctive white stripe, would it be wise to draw even closer and attempt to persuade the skunk to change its stripes?

When the WELS did terminate fellowship with the LCMS in 1961 they did it on the basis of their 1959 false principle. They have continued to hold, teach and practice this false doctrine. For example, the 1989 winter issue of WLQ quoted the action of ELFK (with whom they are in fellowship) in East Germany with approval: "the far reaching differences in doctrine and practice between our churches (ELFK with SELK) continue undiminished . . . we continue in fellowship only under protest."

However in the meetings of committees from WELS-ELS and the CLC in 1988 - 1992 the WELS-ELS representatives agreed to a "Joint Statement" which rejected their 1959 false teaching. The CLC representatives were very hopeful. They therefore proposed a preamble which declared this "Joint Statement" to be a "settlement of the doctrinal difference." The WELS-ELS representatives immediately and unanimously rejected this. They declared: "We believe there never was a doctrinal difference." The WELS commission chairman wrote in a letter of August 8, 1990: "We do not believe there was a real difference between us in doctrine." They instead suggested that it was a difference of exegesis, timing or approach. Notice that this means they were now approving what they had just rejected. When they were directed to that 1959 WELS convention statement as demonstrating a doctrinal difference they now indicated that it was one possible interpretation. The fact that they do not believe that the proposed "Joint Statement" rejected their 1959 position as false doctrine demonstrates that they do not believe that the 1959 statement is false doctrine, and the proposed "Joint Statement" settled nothing. (It must be noted that this "Joint Statement" was only the work of representatives and was never

adopted by any of the church bodies.)

WELS-ELS have accused the CLC of denying the role of admonition in the termination of fellowship. We believe that: 1) Admonition is to be the continuing function of Christian love among brethren (Romans 15:1-14, Galatians 6:1); 2) Romans 16:17,18 is not to be applied to a weak brother, someone who misspoke or taught something wrong unintentionally (II Timothy 4:2); 3) While Roman 16:17,18 does not directly command admonition, the admonition commanded in other passages will normally occur before we recognize anyone as a false teacher; and 4) When it is ascertained that a church body is causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of Scripture, the directive to "avoid" is as binding as any Word of Scripture. This is the voice of our Good Shepherd lovingly protecting His lambs and warning the false teacher.

The WELS commission chairman further explained their unwillingness to agree to a preamble which refers to a doctrinal difference with these words: "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). While we also do not wish to judge such motives or the state of faith, Scripture does ask us to clearly reject every teaching that is contrary to Scripture, I Thessalonians 5:21,22. The Formula of Concord thus clearly rejected statements of false teaching made by well-known theologians. By contrast the failure to clearly reject the errors of the Chicago Statement of the 44 in 1945 and of the Common Confession in 1950 demonstrates how "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Galatians 5:9).

OTHER DIFFERENCES

There have also been manifest, public departures from Biblical practice by WELS in regard to unionistic associations (AAL and LB), Unionism, Women in the Church, Stewardship, the Church Growth philosophy, and lording it over the flock. The public offense of these departures has not been removed.

Unionistic associations (AAL and LB) - WELS-ELS agree that membership in or the reception of funds from an organization that is religious in essence is unionistic. But the 1979 WELS Proceedings argues that: since AAL (now also LB) does not want to be considered essentially religious, nor an ecumenical agency, and promised to distribute its grants to the various church bodies in proportion to the number of its members from that church body, therefore membership in AAL and the reception of money from it is not unionistic.

However AAL's Articles of Incorporation clearly state that its purpose is "to associate Lutherans and their families and thereby enable them through membership in this fraternal benefit society to aid themselves and others with programs of: . . . 3) Assistance to Lutheran congregations and their institutions; and 4) Assistance to such other lawful social, intellectual, educational, charitable, benevolent, moral, fraternal, patriotic, or religious endeavors as the board of directors may determine" (amended August 3, 1984). AAL heavily funds Christ-denying seminaries of ELCA but would not fund pro-life efforts lest it alienate its customers.

Ephesians 5:11 "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness."

Isaiah 5:20 "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil."

Unionism - In a 1996 WELS Worship Conference at Carthage College, WELS sponsored false teachers to teach their pastors and teachers how to promote and encourage Christian worship.

WELS continues joint fellowship practices with LCMS at Bethesda, Watertown, WI.

WELS participated in a Lutheran Brotherhood sponsored "Lutheran Leadership Consultation" in 1991 to jointly develop leadership principles and practices to carry out God's mission in our changing world.

Women in the Church - WELS' Northwestern Lutheran had a lady editor writing editorials instructing the church spiritually. David Baker reports that in classes at the WELS Seminary (1993) they were taught that it is acceptable in certain circumstances to have ladies on church boards. Various congregations have reportedly granted voting authority to ladies. Christian Worship has hymns that were obviously edited to follow the politically correct speech of the feminist movement.

Stewardship - WELS congregations in Southeastern Wisconsin have openly, publicly promoted the community support of their churches through dinners, sales, etc. Though objections were raised, there was no change.

Church Growth philosophy - A number of their pastors and teachers acknowledge sitting at the feet of these errorists. Some of their congregations have practiced false Church Growth principles. WELS has now made many fine statements against the errors of the Church Growth movement. Has the leaven been removed?

Lording it over the flock - The new WELS hymnal, Christian Worship, was established in some congregations without the consent of those congregations.

Christian Worship - This new WELS hymnal has a translation of the Nicene Creed which declares that Jesus became "fully human" and is "one being with the Father." These phrases are, at best, less clear than the former translation. They are open to the misunderstanding that if Jesus is fully human then He is not God, and if He is one being with the Father then they are one person. Creeds are meant to be clear, precise statements of truth that reject such errors.

Pastor John Ude,
Messiah Lutheran Church,
Hales Corners, WI