

YES, THERE IS STILL A DIFFERENCE!

(The continuing difference between the Church of the Lutheran Confession and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod)

Frequently we are told that there is no difference between the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC), and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). This opinion is expressed and promoted by the WELS, but is rejected by the CLC. Meetings were held between representatives of the two bodies in 1972. In the late 1980s and into the 1990s discussions were held for the second time between representatives of the two bodies. The Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) with whom the WELS is in fellowship also participated in the meetings between 1988 and 1992.

After what appeared to be a promising start toward resolution of the historic difference, the meetings of 1988 - 1992 ended, as in 1972, without any settlement.

The following demonstrates from historical material what the difference was that led to the formation of the CLC in 1960, as well as the fact that the original doctrinal difference still exists.

The issue that caused many to sever fellowship with the WELS revolved around the question of termination of fellowship with church bodies and teachers who had forsaken the old paths (Jeremiah 6:16).

The subject of fellowship-- with whom we join in worship and church work-- may seem to some to be of little consequence. We would agree -- if God's Word did not make it important, or did not instruct us on the subject. Furthermore, the visible church in general, and the Lutheran Church in particular is in part in the sorry state it is today because the Scriptural doctrine of church fellowship (Romans 16:17-18) has become seriously watered down, adulterated, and simply rejected. The leaven of error that leavens the whole lump (1 Corinthians 5: 6) has infected the church today with what is known as unionism. Unionists are more interested in union than they are in holding fast to the faithful Word. The lack of a Scriptural fellowship position on one hand, and the inroads of unionism on the other, is sadly apparent in the deterioration of the formerly staunch Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LC-MS), and to an even greater degree in the demise of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

Our concern for the truth of God's Word among us as well as for the continuation of the precious Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ among us, and for the generations that follow us, causes us to review the circumstances that led to the division in the WELS in the late 1950s, and by the grace of God, the subsequent formation of the CLC.

We present this review with an abiding realization of our own weaknesses, and our unworthiness before God. The CLC has never promoted itself as the only church in which God has His children, or as the church outside of which there is no salvation. Fully aware of the accusation of being schismatics we, nevertheless, will not shrink from witnessing to the truth of God's Word. We know of nothing that will heal divisions with former brethren short of honest agreement in what caused the division, and honest and established agreement on what Scripture teaches in all subjects of which it speaks. This includes the doctrine, which is called the doctrine of "fellowship."

We are compelled to this review -- not because we delight in dredging up the past -- but because of the danger of forgetting it. We are further compelled by the necessity to set the record straight over against any suggestion that there is no difference between the CLC and the WELS.

In excerpts from official reports we learn:

1953 The floor Committee of the WELS convention said of the LC- MS "The issue that has opened this serious breach between our Synod and the Missouri Synod and threatened the continuation of the Synodical Conference is Unionism."

The committee said, "by its persistent adherence to its unionistic practice" the Missouri Synod "has brought about the present break in relations that is now threatening the existence of the Synodical Conference..." (WELS Proceedings, pp. 103,104).

1955 The president of the WELS reported in 1955, "Differences in practice have increased and multiplied...the differences that have arisen between us...have not been removed. They have increased." According to the president, the teaching and practice that caused the disruption were being "vigorously defended." Thereafter in the same report he said, "We have reached the conviction that through these

differences divisions and offences have been caused contrary to the doctrine which we have learned. And when that is the case, the Lord our God has a definite command for us: 'Avoid them.'... (WELS Proceedings, page 13)

We note that Romans 16:17, 18 is quoted. In the same report the president said, "We implore the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us as we try to decide in the face of all the reports whether the Lord would have us apply His definite command "Avoid them!" or whether we still have an unpaid debt of love to those whose fellowship we have cherished so many years" (WELS Proceedings, page 14).

The Standing Committee in Matters of Church union reported to the same convention, "We have, however, arrived at the firm conviction that, because of the divisions and offences that have been caused, and which have until now not been removed, further postponement of a decision would be a violation of the apostolic injunction of Romans 16:17 (I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them)."

In view of longstanding divisions and offenses, the Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union proposed the resolution, "that with deepest sorrow...we, in obedience to God's injunction to avoid such, declare the fellowship which we have had with said synod to be terminated" (WELS Proceedings, page 79).

The Floor Committee at the convention responded, "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..." This Preamble to the Committee's report with its indictment of the LC-MS was adopted unanimously!

Then followed: "Out of love for the truth of Scripture we feel constrained to present the following resolution to this convention FOR FINAL ACTION IN A RECESSED SESSION IN 1956 (emphasis added): Resolved, that whereas the Lutheran Church -Missouri Synod has created divisions and offense by its official resolutions, policies, and practices not in accord with Scripture, we, in obedience to the command of our Lord in Romans 16:17-18,

terminate our fellowship with the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod."

A two-to-one majority adopted this part of the resolution. This began the **delaying action** on the part of WELS. It continued until 1961. So while the indictment was unanimous, the resolution to apply Romans 16: 17-18 was delayed for further consideration in a recessed convention! Hence the obedience that was urged instead became disobedience! Admonition and protest continued within the framework of fellowship.

1956 In the recessed convention in Watertown, Wisconsin, the WELS concluded that "our fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod be one of vigorously protesting fellowship."

Note that the WELS-- whose president in convention had previously described the LC-MS as causing "divisions and offences," and whose floor committee in 1955 had concluded that obedience called for separation-- nevertheless concluded it would continue on with the LC-MS, albeit in a "protesting" fellowship. The resolution in 1955 called for action in 1956, but the recessed convention delayed the termination action again.

1957 The floor committee on Church Union quoted with approval the following paragraph of the *Brief Statement* of 1932 of the LC-MS: "Since God ordained that His Word only, without admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, 1 Pet. 4:11, John 8:31,32, 1 Tim. 6:3,4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church bodies, Matt. 7:15, to have church fellowship only with orthodox bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16:17. We repudiate unionism, that is, church fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; II John 9,10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, II Tim. 2:17 - 21."

Thereafter the resolution was offered that church fellowship with the LC-MS be suspended on the basis of Romans 16:17, 18. This resolution failed -- was rejected by the convention! Out of need for some kind of response, the resolution passed that the WELS continue its "vigorously protesting fellowship" over against the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, "because of the continuation of the offenses with which we have charged the sister synod, Romans 16:17, 18..." (Proceeding, pp.143-144).

Again, note the contradiction! In spite of using the passage that calls for separation from a heterodox church, the WELS voted to continue in fellowship, albeit again, in a “protesting” fellowship. Efforts were made by the president to explain the contradiction. The reality is that in 1957 (as in conventions past) the WELS did not follow through with the required action against a body it had recognized as “causing divisions and offenses”

A Protest Committee of the WELS stated in an apparent justification of the situation, “Timing and human judgment appear to be the basic sources of the difference of opinion in our circles concerning the problem at hand” (WELS Proceedings, p.147).

1959 By the 1959 convention the official justification for lack of required action was: “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” (Report to the Protest Committee).

Instead of separation, the Church Union Committee was instructed to continue its efforts until an agreement was reached with the LC-MS, or “until an impasse is reached.” No longer was action to be dictated by recognition of the false doctrine of a church body that the WELS had said was “causing divisions and offenses.” Instead, the action would be based upon a subjective conclusion that discussions were at an impasse, or that “admonition is of no further avail.”

A memorial, or overture to the 1959 convention entitled “A CALL FOR DECISION” forced the issue. This overture urged the WELS to terminate fellowship with the LC-MS. The overture was rejected.

An exodus from the WELS that had begun earlier (1957) now became much larger. After the 1959 convention, many who later formed the Church of the Lutheran Confession left the WELS for reasons of conscience.

The Church of the Lutheran Confession officially began in 1960.

1961 Some of the “whereas” presented to the convention were primarily historical. One “whereas” declared that the WELS “has lodged many admonitions and protests.” Another said, “Our admonitions have largely gone unheeded, and the issues have remained unresolved...” Yet another declared that an “impasse” had been reached, so the convention resolved,

a) “That we now suspend fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod on the basis of Romans 16:17-18...”

Though using Romans 16: 17-18, which speaks of separation on the basis of existing “division and offenses” (which the WELS had recognized for many years), suspension was declared in a large part on the basis of the subjective opinion that an “impasse” had been reached. This resolution passed, though not with a unanimous vote.

1972 A meeting was held between the WELS and the CLC to ascertain if the differences could be settled. This effort ended in failure. In its subsequent convention the WELS resolved

“That we express regret over the failure at that meeting to reach agreement on the doctrine under discussion...”

In 1972 the WELS acknowledged a doctrinal difference!

1988 – 1992 Representatives of the CLC, the WELS, and the ELS met. In a series of meetings, the participants drew up what became known as the “Joint Statement.” To be fair to the WELS, the “Joint Statement” signed by representatives of the three bodies rejected

“The view that the decision to continue or discontinue admonition and proceed to avoid is to be made on the basis of a subjective judgment or conjecture about the possible outcome of admonition.”

Another point said, “We reject the view that permits the use of human judgment to prolong fellowship with persistent errorists contrary to the principles of Scripture.”

However, a troubling expression in the “Joint Statement” was the WELS consistent use of the expression “persistent errorist.” Historically, that expression was a catchword used within the WELS. Its use contributed to the delay in terminating fellowship with the LC-MS. The CLC representatives accepted WELS verbal explanation of “persistent errorist.” However, as has been borne out by subsequent words and actions of the WELS, acceptance of that expression was ill advised.

The CLC proposed that a preamble be added to the “Joint Statement.” The thrust of the CLC preamble was, “Any previous expressions or actions which may not be in conformity with it (the “Joint Statement”) are hereby set aside and rejected.”

This preamble was rejected by the WELS. It countered with a longer preamble, which said that acceptance of the “Joint Statement” -- when accepted by the three church bodies-- “supersedes any and every previous statement that might appear to be in conflict with this document. Any and all such conflicting or possibly conflicting statements are herewith disavowed.”

So how did the preamble of the CLC and that of the WELS differ?

In the Lutheran Confessions as well as in the *Brief Statement* doctrines contrary to the truth are clearly rejected. To reject a contrary doctrine clearly declares that what is contrary to Scripture has no standing whatever with the truth. Without a clear, unequivocal, and unambiguous rejection of past statements contrary to Scripture, the question was open, namely, what is the position of the WELS -- that of the “fathers” or the expressions of the unadopted “Joint Statement”?

A summary of the existing difference:

1. The WELS made the point that they did not “want to sit in judgment of the fathers.” They did not want to use the straightforward preamble of the CLC that used the expressions “reject” and “set aside.” They preferred the words “supersede” and “disavow.” Under the circumstances of the history, the CLC judged that clear and unequivocal words should be used to confirm that the hoped for agreement was indeed an agreement and settlement of differences.

The difference: The point of the CLC was not to sit in judgment of the fathers. It was to reject unequivocally any official statements contrary to Scripture in doctrine or practice.

2. In a letter of August 8, 1990, the Chairman of the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations wrote to the CLC Board of Doctrine, “We do not believe that there was a real difference between us in doctrine, but a difference in regard to the question: ‘Has Missouri been conclusively shown to be persistent in its error...’”
3. In an undated WELS website it said, “In other words, did the WELS fail to break fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1955 and 1957 because it had a faulty doctrine of fellowship with

persistent errorists, or was the delay due to a difference of opinion about whether Missouri Synod had heard and rejected our admonition justifying the conclusion that it was persisting in its error in spite of admonition.” (sic)

The difference: What was it that the “Joint Statement” was supposed to have settled, if in fact as the WELS believes that the meetings addressed a difference that was not really a difference? Also, note again the word “persistent.” The use of that word subjected any action of separation from errorists to human judgment, or to a determination of whether or not the LC-MS was really heterodox, or intended to continue in its errant way. The reader is invited to reread the historical review to see for himself that words and facts clearly show that the LC-MS had been shown conclusively to be heterodox. If the WELS did not mean what it said, it should have withdrawn the charge against the LC-MS!

[Incidentally, the above web site reports that meetings in the “late 1980s and early 1990s failed to reestablish fraternal relations.”]

4. The website said what is frequently said within the WELS, “The Church of the Lutheran Confession was founded by people who left WELS and ELS because they believed these synods were tardy in breaking fellowship with the LCMS” (An undated WELS web site expression). In other words, the WELS rejects the contention that there was a doctrinal difference between itself and those who left. They attribute the difference to a matter of timing.

The difference: The WELS saw the difference only as a issue of timing. The CLC held and still holds that the difference is in doctrine!

5. The CLC and the WELS are not agreed in the stance over against “faith-based” organizations such as Thrivent (Formerly, AAL). The CLC recognizes that membership in a “fraternal,” “faith-based” organization is an exercise of fellowship, and is unionistic. The WELS does not. In practice the CLC neither solicits nor receives money from Thrivent. The WELS does. The CLC encourages and works with members to help them out of the “faith-based” organization that Thrivent claims it is. The WELS does not.
6. In reaction to the LC-MS dealing with the Yankee Stadium unionistic service after September 11, 2001 the WELS in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (Fall 2003 issue, pp. 308-310) said,

“What remains to be seen is what Schulz and confessional Lutherans in the LCMS who have supported his action [i.e. of suspending Benke- DF] will do if the LCMS persists in defending a position on church fellowship which Schulz has correctly declared to be unscriptural.” The CLC, on the other hand, concludes that the conservatives have a responsibility to do without further delay what Scripture directs, namely, avoid the church body that harbors men whom they acknowledge to be false teachers.

The difference: The WELS comment on the Yankee Stadium matter reflects the old position of the WELS, which allegedly had been rejected by the “Joint Statement.” Again, the question is in place: “What is the position of the WELS?” 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.

THE “JOINT STATEMENT” was never presented to the constituency of the CLC or its convention for action.

Before the “Joint Statement” could have been adopted as a settlement, each body would have had to review it. Each body may have suggested changes. Any changes suggested by one body would have required review by the other two. This was not done, certainly not by the CLC. The CLC through its president made the choice not to present the “Joint Statement” for action by the convention, largely because of the position expressed in the WELS letter of August 8, 1990. The “Joint Statement” never was officially adopted. It has no standing as an official statement, much less a settlement. The status quo exists.

The WELS may disagree with the CLC on the status of things today. That is their prerogative.

On the basis of the history, as well as subsequent words and actions of the WELS, the CLC has not changed its conclusion:

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Daniel Fleischer -May 2005 (edited June 2005)

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The continuing difference between the Church of the Lutheran Confession and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

WELS/CLC: The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) continues to publicly declare that there is no difference between itself and the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) on the doctrine of fellowship, especially the termination of fellowship with false teachers and /or heterodox church bodies.

One of the key words in the WELS discussion of termination of fellowship with false teachers and/or heterodox church bodies is the word “persistence.” It is a word that also appears in the infamous but unadopted “Joint Statement” prepared by the CLC, the WELS, and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) in 1990. The undersigned signed his name with some trepidation to that statement. With hindsight the CLC should have followed its first instinct and rejected the use of the word “persistent,” given its history and use in the synodical controversy. In the clarity of hindsight the use of the word should have been rejected if for no other reason than that it introduced an element of confusion. As a signer of that proposed but unadopted statement, this writer admits to being wrong!

The word was used to validate the WELS failure to act in the period up to 1961. When Romans 16:17,18 finally was applied to the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), it was because the WELS declared that an “impasse” had been reached. To demonstrate that determining persistence in error played a part in the WELS inaction over against the LCMS, we offer the following evidence by the manner in which the word is still being used. The evidence clearly delineates the difference that still exists between the CLC and the WELS. It also documents the fact that a lack of a clear statement that rejects the false statements of the past leaves it an open question as to what the position of the WELS is on the matter of termination of fellowship with heterodox church bodies.

In the Fall 2003 issue of the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly (WLQ), (pp 308-310) one finds an LCMS press release announcing the reinstatement of LCMS district president, David Benke. LC-MS

vice-president, Wallace Schulz, had suspended Benke who participated in the Yankee Stadium prayer service after September 11. An appeal panel subsequently reinstated Benke.

In light of the reinstatement, John Brug of the WELS comments, “What remains to be seen is what Schulz and confessional Lutherans in the LCMS who have supported his action [i.e. of suspending Benke- DF] will do if the LCMS persists in defending a position on church fellowship which Schulz has correctly declared to be unscriptural.”

Schulz recognizes that Benke’s participation in the unionistic prayer service was contrary to Scripture. It is not like unionism has just recently reared its head in the LCMS. Why would the WELS suggest that persistence has any place in determining the action that should follow upon ascertaining of false doctrine and practice? Brug does not suggest that the LCMS has erred in weakness or ignorantly, or that it is even concerned about the unionism and syncretism in its midst. The LCMS has in fact most crassly validated unionism. How long must a church body “persist” in its error before the WELS will suggest that now is the time to “avoid” rather than musing about what confessional Lutherans will do if the errorists “persist” in their error?

The LCMS will do what it chooses to do. The WELS will continue to evaluate errorists by their persistence in their error. What the WELS should cease doing is declaring that there is no difference between the CLC and themselves! The WELS is waiting to see what the “confessional Lutherans” in the LCMS will do “if the LCMS persists in defending a position on church fellowship” that is recognized as unscriptural. The CLC on the other hand concludes that the conservatives have a responsibility to do without further delay what Scripture directs, namely, avoid the church body that harbors men whom they acknowledge to be false teachers. The difference between the CLC and the WELS could hardly be any clearer.

Daniel Fleischer

