

The Formation of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod's
Doctrinal Statement Regarding Men and Women Roles

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The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) does not have a history of producing an abundance of doctrinal statements. Their standard practice is quite to the contrary. This leads one to notice the rare occurrence of a published doctrinal statement and ponder what reason or event prompted it. Why this topic? Why this time?

These questions are well addressed to the doctrinal statement of the WELS regarding men and women roles. Below we shall examine nearly two decades of discussion and events which necessitated the synod's public stance. We shall note both the need for the statement as well as the patient deliberation and care that was devoted to the task. It was not a matter taken quickly or lightly.

The Commission on Inter-Church Relations (CICR) is responsible for representing our synod's doctrinal position to other church bodies and Christians outside the WELS.¹ It is natural then, to find the document under their supervision. But as history shows, it was originally directed inwards - not representing our doctrine to outsiders, but to clarify our position to our own people. The introduction to *WELS Doctrinal Statements* describes the WELS' position on doctrinal statements:

In this booklet [*WELS Doctrinal Statements*] we are confessing articles of faith, truths revealed by God in the Holy Scriptures. Even a brief look at the size and contents of the booklet, however, will show this is not a listing of everything we believe and teach on the basis of the Bible. A word of explanation, therefore, is appropriate to indicate why these relatively few statements are here printed.

As a synod we do not formulate doctrinal declarations on a regular basis. We confess the full inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures and their binding authority in all matters of doctrine. The three ecumenical creeds, the primary creedal statements of historic Christianity, summarize well our faith. In addition, we wholeheartedly subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions (contained in the *Book of Concord* of 1580) because they are correct expositions of biblical truth. Since our Christian and Evangelical Lutheran forefathers have bequeathed us such

¹ Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *Commission on Inter-Church Relations*, [WELS Website]; available from <http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?10007&groupID=895>; Internet; accessed 11 December 2005.

accurate and comprehensive doctrinal affirmations, we seldom feel the need to draft additional ones...

Why then has the Wisconsin Synod formulated these particular doctrinal statements? A reader will notice that many of the statements deal with subjects not fully or explicitly addressed in the Lutheran Confessions. So to a degree we felt the need to supplement what the forefathers wrote. G. K. Chesterton is quoted as saying that "truths turn into dogma the moment they are disputed." We acknowledge that the dogma here published was occasioned by controversy either in our own synodical dealings or in the society in which we live. We shall always find necessity and value in confessing the truth in the face of error. Part of our Christian responsibility is to clarify the truth when confronted by questions, and to affirm the truth as an encouragement to those who struggle against falsehood. These doctrinal statements testify that our synod saw the need to set forth the truth in the face of controversy at various times in its history.²

It is true that controversy within the WELS caused the doctrinal statement to be formulated. The statement, published in 1993, traces its beginning back almost 20 years earlier to 1975. Professor John Brug of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary comments, "The discussion of the issue [men and women roles] became more prominent in the synod after a paper delivered by Prof Gawrisch at a teachers conference in 1975."³ This comment helps us understand why, four years later in the 1979 synod convention, it was the Commission for Higher Education [CHE] which brought the issue to the spotlight.⁴ The school system seems the natural breeding ground for this issue, as the discussion of authority would easily come up in regards to women teachers and their roles within the synod's ministry.

The CHE had initially dealt with the issue internally, but soon were compelled to bring it to the attention of the Conference of Presidents (COP). In 1978, the CHE formulated a statement titled "The Role of Man and Woman According to Holy Scripture". After appropriately submitting it to the COP for review and approval, the CHE then submitted it to the synod

² Commission On Inter-Church Relations, *WELS Doctrinal Statements* [WELS Website]; available from <http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?2617&collectionID=795&contentID=4439&shortcutID=5293>; Internet; accessed 11 December 2005.

³ As shared with the author in a memo from Prof. Brug received 02 December 1995.

⁴ The CHE has since been renamed "Commission for Ministerial Education" (CME).

convention in 1979: “The following statement was adopted by the Commission on Higher Education in April 1978. Before submitting it to the Synod, the commission sought approval by the Conference of Presidents. Since this approval has been given, we now submit the statement to the Synod.”⁵

The floor committee assigned to review the statement returned Resolution 19, in which they stated that the subject is “of great concern in our times” but was “too weighty to be studied in depth by this convention.” They recommended a three-fold action: 1) “that the theses be thoroughly studied by congregations and conferences of our districts as opportunities present themselves”; 2) “that the 1980 district conventions officially study the theses and submit summary reports to the Commission on Higher Education”; 3) “that the CHE report the results of the districts’ studies to the 1981 convention of the Synod.”⁶ These resolutions were adopted.⁷

The CHE reported the results to the subsequent convention in 1981: “Four districts expressed basic agreement with the theses and the paper.” These districts encouraged additions and changes, but agreed “with the substance of the essay”. The majority of the districts’ responses called for further work, be it rewording, or clarifying. There was only one district which might be considered to have rejected the paper. But that district did not necessarily disagree with the substance of the essay. Rather they considered it incomplete and unclear, so that they could not “accept this essay as a position paper.”⁸

⁵ Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *Book of Reports and Memorials*, 1979, p. 5. Hereafter cited as *BORAM*.

⁶ Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *Proceedings*, 1979, p. 87. Hereafter cited as *Proceedings*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁸ *BORAM*, 1981, 16-17.

When the districts were asked to study the essay, another question arose: “why had the CHE considered it advisable to issue such a statement?”⁹ Their response was that “the statement resulted from some specific questions which had arisen in our synodical schools with respect to the role and function of men and women instructors in our worker training schools.”¹⁰ In addressing these, the CHE had thought it best to do a thorough scriptural study, rather than offer a few simple rules, lest a few simple rules become entrenched tradition.¹¹

Well aware of the synod’s struggle with the question of men and women’s roles, WLS’ *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly (WLQ)* produced no less than six exegetical essays pertaining to the roles issue throughout 1981, in Volume 78, Numbers 3 and 4.

The need to study the issue further was made even more evident by three memorials at the 1981 convention. One requested further study with regards to the exegesis of passages which formed our practice of women’s suffrage.¹² Another brought specific questions concerning the exegesis of passages in the CHE’s original essay “The Role of Man and Woman According to Holy Scripture.”¹³ The remaining one encouraged the synod to quickly reaffirm its longtime stance on the roles, suggesting further study would be detrimental and cause the sides to become entrenched.¹⁴ The three memorials were handled by a threefold resolution. It was resolved “a) that this matter be referred to the Conference of Presidents (COP) to appoint an appropriate committee for further extensive study”; “b) that this appointed committee report to the districts

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹² *BORAM*, 1981, 245.

¹³ *Proceedings*, 1981, 41.

¹⁴ *BORAM*, 1981, 243-244.

of the WELS in convention in 1982”; and “c) that a pamphlet or other exposition of the subject matter in readily understood language be offered to the members of the Synod as soon as authorized by the COP.”¹⁵

The COP appointed 10 men to the committee for further study (one pastor from each of the synod’s district): Rev. Wayne D. Mueller (Chairman), Rev. Arno J. Wolfgramm (Secretary), Rev. Mark Braun, Prof. Arnold J. Koelpin, Rev. Silas R. Krueger, Rev. Joh. P. Meyer, Rev. Roger L. Sachs, Rev. John C. Schneidervin, Rev. John J. Sullivan, and Prof. Richard L. Wiechmann.¹⁶

The study has so far been traced from the CHE to the COP to the convention (1979), then out to the districts and back to the next convention (1981); and now to the 10-man special committee which would report to the districts in 1982 and then bring their completed pamphlet to the synod in convention. The 1983 convention saw no new action taken, but the COP reported that “procedures were established to enable the districts to share their reactions to the report with the committee. As soon as the committee has completed its work a pamphlet or other exposition will be offered the members of the synod.”¹⁷

The committee released a COP-approved pamphlet titled “Man and Woman in God’s World” to the districts for their study and reaction in 1985.¹⁸ It was not yet prepared to bring their formal study to the 1985 convention, although it was “nearing completion.” Two more memorials were presented to the convention that year, one of which challenged the WELS’

¹⁵ *Proceedings*, 1981, 59.

¹⁶ As listed on the *Report of the Committee on the Role of Man and Woman According to Holy Scriptures*, currently in the personal possession of Prof. John Brug.

¹⁷ *BORAM.*, 1983, 191.

¹⁸ Commission On Inter-Church Relations, *WELS Doctrinal Statements* [WELS Website]; available from <http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?2617&collectionID=795&contentID=4439&shortcutID=5293>; Internet; accessed 11 December 2005.

position, were presented to the convention.¹⁹ The other was again a call for clarification and guidance.²⁰ The convention decided to simply wait for the committee's report. It could not come quickly enough. In the meantime, Prof. Kuske wrote yet another article regarding the "Order of Creation" in the *WLQ*, Vol. 82, no. 1.

Again in 1987, the synod in convention would have to wait for a definitive statement on the roles issue. The 10-man committee had produced an "expanded study", which was published by Northwestern Publishing House. It was offered to the districts for yet more study and feedback.²¹

Finally in the 1989 convention, the committee's statement, "Man and Woman in God's World" (MAWIGW) was proposed as the synod's official doctrinal position.²² A counter-memorial was presented, arguing that since the roles were already established in God's Word, presented well in the pamphlet and being monitored by the district officers, "it would be unwise for the synod to adopt its doctrine by synod resolution."²³ Another consideration was that the committee had been directed in 1981 to put their exposition in "readily understood language" for the people of the synod to read and understand. They had deliberately produced a work in a narrative style without specific reference to the Hebrew or Greek languages and avoided the thesis-antithesis approach.²⁴ So even though the entire convention was in agreement with the statement's doctrine itself, it was clear that MAWIGW would not serve as a suitable doctrinal

¹⁹ *BORAM*, 1985, 319-20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 320-21.

²¹ *BORAM*, 1987, 117.

²² *BORAM*, 1989, 252.

²³ *Proceedings*, 1989, 51.

²⁴ As described in the *Report of the Committee on the Role of Man and Woman According to Holy Scriptures*, currently in the personal possession of Prof. John Brug.

statement. An alternative was offered: that the COP prepare a statement for the 1991 convention that was specifically framed as a doctrinal statement. The convention resolved to “receive the document, ‘Man and Woman in God’s World’...as a correct exposition of the scriptural teachings in this matter...that we also urge the COP to prepare a brief, formal doctrinal statement for consideration by the 1991 convention.”²⁵

The COP appointed what would be the third independent committee to study the issue. It was made up of Prof. Wayne Mueller, Prof. John Brug, Rev. Richard Lauersdorf, Prof. Armin Schuetze, and Rev. Harold Wicke. This committee worked to produce a preliminary statement, which was published for critique in the *Northwestern Lutheran*. The feedback was considered and the revised document, “Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles” was presented to the 1991 convention. Several memorials offered suggestions for clarification of wording. Finally, after more than 10 years of official study, the synod adopted the document MAWIGW as a “correct exposition of scripture.”²⁶ Recognizing the amount of confusion among the people on this issue, the 1991 convention also directed the COP to authorize Bible study materials which would help the members of the synod understand and apply the principles.²⁷ The task was turned over to Prof. John Brug, who had already been preparing the materials for a Bible study on his own. The COP recommended he continue developing this Bible study and present it as fulfillment of the 1991 resolution. In 1992 the ten-lesson Bible study with teacher's manual entitled “A Bible Study on Man and Woman in God's World,” was published.

The issue continued to be studied locally throughout the synod, and much feedback was received. For this reason, a revised edition was again brought to the 1993 convention and

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

²⁶ *Proceedings*, 1991, 59-60.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

adopted.²⁸ Yet one thing remained desired. The convention requested a “companion document or pamphlet, popularly written, which will be marked by brevity, practicality, and a positive tone.”²⁹ The task was given to Walter Beckmann, who produced “The Spirit in Which We Apply the Scriptural Roles of Man and Woman” in 1994.

It was a time of confession. The confusion and challenges, the feedback and discussions that spanned two decades all illustrate how necessary it was that our synod stand firm and united on the truths of scripture. It was a time to purify and crystallize, to ponder and wrestle with the issues of who we are and who God wants us to be. It was a time to declare as one body that just as God’s will and Word never change, so shall our doctrine never change. The challengers who wished to weaken our stance merely served to strengthen it. Praise God that he has given the WELS such people, devoted to searching out and applying his will, no matter the cost. May he continue to do so.

²⁸ *Proceedings*, 1993, 56.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

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