

Romans 16:17

[This essay was presented at the New Ulm Pastoral Conference, September 25, 1957]

by Paul Nolting

Introduction

It's quite some number of years ago that Romans 16:17 was first used in connection with the widening rift in matters of doctrine and practice between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods. Those who used the passage against Missouri in the early years of the debate no doubt used the passage inadvisedly and prematurely. The passage became a part of the official record of our case against Missouri when it was used at our Saginaw Convention as the Scriptural basis for the resolution to terminate fellowship with Missouri. The passage was debated on the floor at Saginaw. Since then it has been debated in the Standing Church Union Committee meetings, the General Synodical Committee meetings, and at the conventions at Watertown in 1956 and New Ulm in 1957. During these years contradictory assertions, argumentations, and interpretations relative to this passage have been made and permitted to stand. Contradictory exegetical papers on the passage have been read, given publicity, and permitted to stand. The result is that we are now tolerating an *unwholesome* latitude of theological opinion on this Word of God. We have arrived at the point where we, as a synod, are now espousing two contradictory doctrines of church fellowship, one demanding a severance of fellowship with those whom we have recognized to be causers of divisions and offenses and the other insisting upon a continuance of fellowship with the same. Both sides base their positions on the same passage, Romans 16:17. At Saginaw in 1955 [our] synod used the passage in connection with the thought of *terminating fellowship* with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. At New Ulm in 1957 the hastily drawn-up resolutions use the passage in connection with *continuing fellowship* with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, but on a "vigorously protesting" basis. The use of the passage is explained in a note to refer not to the present status of our fellowship with Missouri in an effort to define it, but to explain the term "offenses." But if the offenses are defined and described by Romans 16:17, then Paul's admonition in Romans 16:17 should have been applied rather than his admonition in 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15. The present confusion as a result of this situation is but one of the lesser evils. The devastating evil is that we, as a synod, by permitting contradictory interpretations, exegetical papers, and resolutions to stand, have made this Word of God null and void in our midst. May the Lord mercifully lead us as a synod to repentance and to a return to a true confession of this Word of the Lord.

The present, sad situation in our synod, then, revolves about disagreement on this passage. Since the New Ulm convention the undersigned has felt that a set of theses and antitheses on the passage would help clear the air and aid in restoring agreement on this passage and thus the unity of the spirit. By brethren in the area I was encouraged to begin work on such theses and antitheses. Since that time I have incurred a debt of gratitude, which I herewith acknowledge, to these brethren for their loving and patient assistance in the wording of these theses and antitheses. Another of the brethren, not of this area, consented to sit through a private reading of this paper.

Now may the Lord graciously use this feeble effort towards restoring in our midst the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

I. On the clarity and authority of this passage

We affirm:

1. **the clarity and authority of this passage, both in the original Greek and in the clear, correct rendering of our German and English translations.**

We reject:

1. **any implication by argumentation from the Greek text or by any other argumentation that this passage is unclear, thus subjecting its meaning to human judgment, and in this way destroying its divine authority.**

“Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path” (Psalm 119:105). These brief, clear words clearly teach the clarity of Scripture. The clarity of Scripture is defined in this way by F. Pieper, “According to Scripture, the perspicuity of Scripture consists in this, that it presents, in language that can be understood by all, whatever men must know to be saved” (I, p. 320, par. 2). To this we add that all doctrines of Scripture, non-fundamental as well as fundamental are clearly taught in clear passages of Scripture. Again F. Pieper: “Augustine, Luther, Chemnitz, Gerhard, regard it as a well-established axiom that all Christian doctrines are revealed in passages that need no explanation whatever” (I, p. 324).

If ye continue in My word, then are ye My disciples indeed” (John 8:31). Faithfulness to the Lord’s Word is the authoritative norm for discipleship. “The Word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the Last Day” (John 12:48). The Lord’s Word is the authoritative norm for final judgment. All must one day bow beneath the authority of the Word. The believer and the church are bound by the Word now in this world. The Smalcald Articles express the authority of the Word in this way: “The rule is: The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel” (Trig., p. 467).

These two truths, the clarity and authority of Scripture, form the basis for the great principle of the Reformation, the *sola scriptura*. By God’s grace the *sola scriptura* was restored to the church through the Reformation, thus freeing Christians once again from the bondage of human tyranny. If we today abandon this priceless heritage, we exchange the slavery to the Word, which is true liberty, for the liberty of slavery to the word of man. From this preserve us, Lord, in mercy!

We sincerely believe that no one in our circles will challenge these basic principles, which are the foundation of our whole theology. Yet while clinging to these principles as a synod, we have individuals, who, unwittingly we are sure, have been guilty of denying by implication both the clarity and authority of this particular passage, Romans 16:17, which has served us as a *sedes* for the doctrine of church fellowship for nigh on to a century. We heartily subscribe to the words of the memorial addressed to the Synodical Conference, August 3-6, 1948: “We point out that Romans 16:17f is a clear passage, so simple that a child can understand it, though there are those who becloud it. It is a *sedes doctrinae*, the clear Word of God, the foundation stone of the Synodical Conference’s practice in matters of fellowship, that is attacked.” If the clarity of any *sedes doctrinae* is denied, then the clarity and authority of all Scripture is undermined.

The Greek text of the passage is clear. The meaning of the key words can easily be determined by studying the way the Holy Spirit chose to use them elsewhere in the Scriptures. The textual variants of the verb, avoid, (most likely the present imperative, but possibly the aorist) do not materially alter the meaning. A study of the tenses and articles serves to bring the divine Word into sharper focus. No study of the original text can becloud the clarity of the passage for the unprejudiced student. We freely admit that much that has been written on the basis of the original text has served to becloud the text, but that is not due to lack of clarity in the text but may well be due to prejudice in the writer. F. Pieper very aptly remarks, “Scripture remains dark also to those whose prejudice against certain Scripture doctrines keeps them from even textually taking note of the respective words of Scripture” (I, p. 322, pt. 3). Also: “God has given us his Word in order to deliver us from our own perverse thoughts of God and divine matters. But if we will not give up our own thoughts, but oppose them to God’s thoughts and thus condemn God in his Word, the dread judgment will come upon us: We will look upon God’s Word as obscure and offensive” (I, p. 322).

The same clarity holds true for the commonly used translations among us, Luther's and the King James. The translations do not alter nor conflict with the Greek text. In all catechisms in use in the Synodical Conference, the German and English editions of Gausewitz, the recently revised Gausewitz, the old Schwan, and the newer revised "Synodical Conference" catechism, Romans 16:17 is cited as a proof passage under the question on church fellowship. Our own synod, as well as the entire Synodical Conference, has always thought the English and German translations of Romans 16:17 to be so clear that our confirmation children could understand the passage and apply it in their daily lives. It has served and is still serving as God's authoritative Word for us and our children on the matter of fellowship.

For the above reasons we repeat again: We believe and affirm the clarity and authority of this passage, both in the original Greek and in the clear, correct rendering of our German and English translations. In the debate on this passage at the convention in Saginaw in 1955 and since then, especially at our recent New Ulm Convention, speakers referred to the Greek text of Romans 16:17. Some of them implied with their remarks that there is some basic difference between our commonly used English and German translations and the original text. The passionate cry came to the convention: "Back to the Greek!" The speaker who made this plea implied thereby that his opponents in the debate had not studied the Greek text and so were guilty of arriving at an incorrect understanding of the passage because the translations do not express the thought of the Greek text correctly. When the convention rejected the report of its floor committee, another speaker heralded the action as obedience to Romans 16:17 "in the Greek text." What is the simple Christian, the lay delegate at the convention, to think of such remarks? His confidence in the well-known and daily-used German and English translations cannot but be undermined. His confidence in his pastor who explained this Word of God to him on the basis of the translations cannot but be shaken. His confidence in the whole Bible he reads is undermined. By such argumentation it was implied that not the simple Christian but only the learned theologian, who knows his Greek, can determine the meaning of Scripture. By the same argumentation the layman was robbed of the certainty of his faith and his God-given right and prerogative to prove all things. Therefore, we reject any implication by argumentation from the Greek text that this passage is unclear, thus subjecting its meaning to human judgment, and in this way destroying its divine authority.

Likewise we reject any other argumentation that tends to accomplish the same. One such argument is the argument on the basis of a false love, a love unknown to God and the holy writers but developed by the deceitful heart of man, a love which ignores the second commandment of the Decalog and the first petition of the Lord's Prayer. The passionate pleas for the exercise of love toward the persistently erring Missouri Synod rather than the application of our passage leave the impression that the God of love cannot possibly be the author of Romans 16:17. In the minds of some the command to separate from errorists seems to conflict with love. Others seem to think that God has in his Word given us the choice of one of two paths to travel, either that of love or the way of separation from the persistently erring. Such argumentation turns God against himself, sets one of his words against another, destroys the clarity of this scripture passage, and nullifies the divine authority of this word. We reject any argumentation that in any way tends to make this passage unclear, thus subjecting its meaning to human judgment, and in this way destroying its divine authority.

Lord Jesus Christ, with us abide,
For round us falls the eventide;
Nor let Thy Word, that heav'nly light,
For us be ever veiled in night.

Hymn 292, S. 1 (TLH)

II. On the meaning of the verb “mark” (σκοπεῖν) and admonition

We affirm:

1. the meaning of the verb σκοπεῖν to be a careful observing in the interest of, and affecting, the observer without an effect upon the observed, except when the object is reflexive.

We reject:

1. the addition of the concept of admonition to the verb σκοπεῖν.

The word σκοπεῖν is used by the holy writers six times, once by St. Luke (11:35) and five times by St. Paul (2 Cor 4:18; Ga 6:19; Php 2:4, 3:17; and Ro 16:17). The verb appears in the compound form of ἐπισκοποῦντες in Hebrews 12:15. Thayer gives as a definition of the verb from Homer down: “to look at, observe, contemplate.” With the indefinite object τινά the verb means “to fix one’s eyes upon, direct one’s attention to, anyone.” When we examine the places where the Spirit of God moved St. Luke and St. Paul to use this word in their writings, we find that the following distinct characteristics flavor the meaning of the verb:

1. It is a personal, private, careful observing in the interest of and affecting the observer.
2. It is a careful observing that does not affect the observed except when the object of the verb is reflexive.

A brief investigation of the passages in which this verb is used will serve to confirm these observations.

The first passage is Luke 11:35. The context from verse 29 on reveals Jesus rebuking the people as an “evil generation” because they refused to accept one “greater than Solomon.” Then follows the appeal to the hearers not to fall into this same condemnation. Verse 33 expresses the general truth that no one lights a candle and puts it in the basement or under a bushel, but on a candlestick. Verse 34 applies this general truth to the individual. Whether the body sees or not will depend upon whether the eye, that is, the heart which controls the spiritual life of the individual, is single or evil. After this foundation has been laid, verse 35 brings the exhortation: σκόπει, take heed, observe carefully, therefore that the light which is in them be not darkness.” Notice that each individual hearer is to do this careful observing. No one can do it for him. It is both personal and private, within the individual. But this observing is in the greatest interest of and is to have a definite, decided effect upon the observer. In this verse the salvation of the observer’s soul depends upon the effect of the observing upon himself. Either he will be led to repentance and faith or to blindness and hardened unbelief. In this case the object of the verb σκόπει is an indirect question introduced by μή, “that the light which is in thee be not darkness.” Here the object is reflexive in nature. That which is to be observed is the spiritual condition of the observer’s heart. It is a self-observation or self-examination. The observing has no effect whatsoever on anything or anyone outside of the observer.

The first passage from St. Paul is 2 Corinthians 4:18. In chapter four St. Paul is speaking of his Gospel-ministry. Beginning with verse 8 he speaks of his suffering for Christ’s sake in connection with his Gospel-ministry. Yet he is unable to cease preaching, for his faith compels him to testify. He is buoyed up and encouraged to continue by the victory assured him through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He repeats the thought of Romans 8:18 in verse 17, that the present affliction is but as nothing compared with the coming glory. And then comes verse 18, a verse of hope, “while we look not (μή σκοπούμεν τῶν ἡμῶν) at the things which are seen (all the suffering connected with the preaching of the Gospel), but at the things which are not seen (the coming glorious resurrection and final victory with Christ).” Notice once again that St. Paul is revealing to his readers a type of careful observing that he and his associates are doing, that is private and personal in nature, but which is in their own interest and which will have a definite effect upon them. It is to fill Paul and his associates with *hope* and with joy, courage, and willingness to continue in the gospel ministry. In this case the object of the observing is a looking away from the present realities (all the suffering for the Gospel’s sake) and at the

eternal realities(the final victory and glory with Christ). Note that the observing affects neither the seen nor the unseen. The sufferings remain whether they are carefully observed or not. The unseen eternal realities likewise remain unchanged and unaffected by the careful observing. But the observer is to be affected by his observing and is to profit therefrom.

St. Paul uses σκοπεῖν once again in Galatians 6:1. In chapter five of his epistle St. Paul urges the Galatians to stand fast “in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.” He warns again against the false teachers who were destroying that liberty by the addition of works to faith as necessary for salvation. Then he passes on to a warning against the misuse of that liberty. In the last part of the chapter he directs himself to matters of morals, warning against the works of the flesh and encouraging the works of the spirit. In chapter six Paul tackles the problem of what is to be done if a person is overtaken in a fault, either suffering the loss of Christian liberty by becoming the victim of law-works or by misusing that liberty by giving way to the flesh. He says, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness.” And then comes a personal note to the person restoring such an one that is overtaken, “considering thyself (σκοπῶν σεαυτόν), lest thou also be tempted.” Here again the “considering” or “observing” is extremely private and personal, a matter of self-soul-searching. Who is to benefit from it? The observer, none else. He is to observe in his own interest and profit by his observation personally. Through his observing he is to be preserved from falling victim by spiritual pride into the same temptation from which he is seeking to rescue another. Each corrector of a brother is to be careful, for as St. Paul says, 1 Cor 10:12: “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” There is no second party or thing involved here. And so the observing cannot affect another since in this case the object is reflexive.

St. Paul uses the σκοπεῖν again in Philippians 2:4. Beginning the chapter with a truly evangelical motivation in verse 1, adding a personal note in verse 2, Paul continues with his basic admonition that the Philippians be “like-minded.” In verse 3 the particulars start. He warns against pride and haughtiness. Verse 4 is a warning against selfishness, which will destroy the “like-mindedness.” Paul says, “Look not every man on his own things (μὴ...σκοποῦντες), but every man also on the things of others.” Each individual member of the Philippian congregation is to do this “looking not, but looking at.” He is to do it as a matter of self-interest in the interest or benefit for himself. This careful observing is to preserve the “looker” from selfishness which would make him guilty of destroying the “like-mindedness.” Here this object of the “looking” is expressed in the negative with the positive implied. It directs the observer away from his own personal concerns to the problems and concerns of another, not with the primary intent of affecting either his own things or the other person’s, but to affect his own heart, mind, attitude, spiritual health.

Paul uses σκοπεῖν again in Philippians 3:17. In chapter three Paul speaks autobiographically of his own spiritual experience of being freed from the law and given grace. He then pictures his own life in grace as a continual striving forward in grace through this life until he receives the crown. In verse 15 Paul begins to urge the Philippians towards the same and. In 17 his appeal waxes more passionate. “Brethren,” he says, “be joint imitators of me and mark those in Philippi who walk as I walk, and imitate them.” The marking is a personal, private, spiritual activity in the interest of and for the benefit of the marker. The marking is to motivate the marker to imitate, copy, the good example of Paul and other like-walking Philippians. Thus the marker is to grow in sanctification. What he marks is the good example of others, but that marking does not affect those good examples in any way whatever. It is rather to affect any and all who do such marking.

We now come to Paul’s use of σκοπεῖν in the passage under consideration, Romans 16:17. There is no indication in the text that σκοπεῖν is here being used in a new sense or with a meaning or flavor different from its usage in the other passages. As both an apostle and as a brother to brethren Paul beseeches, pleads with the Romans to mark, to keep their eye on, to observe carefully. This marking is in the interest of the Romans and all Christians who do such marking. The specific instruction connected with the marking in this case indicates that the marking is in the interest of self-protection against errorists, association with whom will endanger the Christian’s faith. The marking is to have a definite effect upon those doing the marking. The effect the marking

is to have upon the markers is so important that the apostle names it specifically. The marker is to avoid those whom he has carefully observed to be causing divisions and offenses. However, the marking has no effect upon those causing divisions and offenses. In no passage does the verb *σκοπεῖν* indicate an action initiated by the subject of *σκοπεῖν* upon the object of the *σκοπεῖν*. The action of *σκοπεῖν* has an effect upon the subject of the verb, not upon its object. So strong is this characteristic of the verb that the object tends to be reflexive. Mark thyself, mark a condition of thine own heart, mark not your own things. But always the marking is to bounce back and affect the marker. Something or someone other than the marker is not directly affected by the marking.

This then being the case, we reject the addition of the concept of admonition to the verb *σκοπεῖν*. Neither the dictionaries nor the use of the verb in Scripture admit of this concept in defining the verb. It just isn't there! This further characteristic of the verb that it affects the subject rather than the object, except when the object is reflexive, which strengthens this characteristic, also rules out the concept of admonition. For admonition is a definite spiritual activity upon the admonished. How did this concept of admonition come to be added to the verb *σκοπεῖν*? Possibly some when studying this passage had in their minds the long process of admonition being carried on for years by our synod over against Missouri. A place for this labor of love, this admonishing, was then thought to be found in the *σκοπεῖν*. But it just isn't there!

In bringing to your attention and emphasizing for you this peculiar flavor of *σκοπεῖν*, namely, that it is a personal, private, careful observing that goes on within the observer without affecting a second party, the observed, there may arise the thought that no outside person is at all involved. Each individual person does his "skopeining," and when he is finished with it, then it will have its proper effect upon him. When applying this thought to our present situation it would mean that each pastor, professor, congregation, and individual should and will eventually *σκοπεῖν* and when he is finished, he will avoid. We have been assured that when the time is ripe, the resolution to avoid will be unanimous. Notice, however, that it is the Apostle Paul, who with divine authority from the outside, is beseeching, urging, exhorting the Roman Christians to do and not neglect the *σκοπεῖν*. In the Luke passage it was the Lord who was urging the *σκοπεῖν* upon his hearers. In the other passages Paul again was urging the *σκοπεῖν* to achieve various ends in his readers. In all cases the impetus to do the *σκοπεῖν* came from the outside. In a group of Christians, such as our synod, one is to serve the other. The gifts of all are to be pooled for the benefit of all. In the case before us the *σκοπεῖν* is to have a protective effect upon us. God has given some keener insight, deeper knowledge, a braver spirit. Some have been placed by God through the vote of the body into places of leadership and responsibility. They have the responsibility of sounding the alarm for the synod as a body, just as the pastor has that responsibility in his congregation. By the same token an outsider may help another Christian do his *σκοπεῖν* by showing him how the erring have progressed to the condition of being errorists, and so causers of division and offenses. Since Christians are gathered together by the Holy Ghost through the means of grace the *σκοπεῖν* is generally done collectively. In such a case the effect of the *σκοπεῖν* is collective, upon the whole group. Of course, when the group skopeins, each individual is also to *σκοπεῖν* for himself. That was the original setting in the epistle to the Romans. For us the group is even larger.

We affirm:

- 2. that the simultaneous physical and practical effect of the marking upon the marker is the avoiding.**

We reject:

- 2. the insertion of a period of admonition between the marking and the avoiding.**

We have already noted that the marking produces an effect upon the marker. In the passages examined he marks and repents, marks and is filled with hope, marks and is on guard against temptation, marks and is on

guard against selfishness, marks and imitates a good example. In all these cases the effect is clearly implied but not always specifically stated. In our passage Paul specifically names in the form of an imperative the effect the marking is to have upon the marker. He is to mark and avoid. There is no time lapse, as little as there is in our common expressions, “sit and rest,” “look and see,” “be quiet and listen.” The avoiding is simultaneous with the marking. That does not mean that it has to be simultaneously carried out, for the avoiding is the physical and practical effect of the marking. It involves the marker as a physical person. The marker may mark in the privacy of his study and simultaneously he avoids, but the practical avoiding does not come until a situation arises that demands the physical and practical carrying out of the avoiding.

We reject the insertion of a period of admonition between the marking and the avoiding. And the reason why? It just isn't in the text. St. Paul just doesn't say, “Mark, admonish, and then avoid.” If he would have wanted the concept of admonition in this passage, he surely would have used some other word besides σκοπεῖν.

We affirm:

3. that the action of the verb is directed at anyone and everyone who persistently disobeys the truth in doctrine and practice, thus causing divisions and offenses.

We reject:

4. any argument that this passage calls for admonition, while granting the admonitory effect of the “avoiding.”

For the purpose of discussion this point can be considered thetically and antithetically at the same time. The point is that this passage is dealing with people who, as far as our generation is concerned, always have been disobedient to the truth or people who once were obedient but who, despite all admonition, have become persistently disobedient. The latter situation concerns us chiefly at the moment. Romans 16:17 *presupposes* loving admonition. It comes after such admonition has failed, for it has to do with people who are persistently disobedient, and are thus causing divisions and offenses. This passage is the end of the trail. Its only admonition is the possible admonitory effect of the “avoiding.”

St. Paul's letters abound in exhortations and instruction regarding the admonition of the brother who errs. Romans 14 and 15 are two such chapters. They advise the strong how to deal with the weak in a loving manner regarding eating meats and observing days and other vestiges of Judaism. When one reads 1 Corinthians, one has reason to be thankful for not having all the problems to face that Paul faced in that one congregation. Paul had to deal with schismatic people, a morally defunct person, people who were in error regarding the Lord's Supper, and even some who held the heretical view that there is no resurrection. The whole epistle is a model example of loving admonition, that fervent seeking to show the sinner the error of his ways and lead him back to the truth. In Galatians Paul strikes out vigorously against the errorists who teach a gospel which is not another, chapter one, but deals so gently with the victims of those errors in chapter six. In 2 Thessalonians 3 Paul is dealing with brethren who have progressed to the point of making propaganda for their errors by their way of life. The situation is more serious. St. Paul directs the Thessalonians to a form of withdrawal for the purpose of shaming the brother, yet all within the bonds of fellowship. In all this instruction regarding admonition and in his own practice of such admonition, as we see it in his epistles, St. Paul is but applying unto himself and others the three parables of our Lord recorded in Luke 15: the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Piece of Silver, and the Lost Sons. But when we come to Romans 16:17, St. Paul takes us beyond all of this. What is the Christian to do when he is confronted with those who persistently disobey the truth in doctrine and practice, thus causing divisions and offenses? When that situation arises, Paul says, then you mark and avoid. That's no time for admonition although the action of “avoiding” may still have an admonitory effect upon the causers of divisions and offenses.

Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds

Is like to that above.

Hymn 464, S. 1 (TLH)

III. On the meaning of the verb “avoid” (ἐκκλίνετε)

We affirm:

1. **that, as basic to the scriptural meaning and use of the verb it calls for an initial break, a point of cleavage, with some former and preceding condition, course of action, or relationship.**

We reject:

1. **all definitions of the verb as a process of “leaning away” while still maintaining the former and preceding condition, course of action, or relationship.**

Thayer defines ἐκκλίνω as meaning “to turn aside, deviate.” With ἀπό and the genitive of persons it means “to turn away from, keep aloof from one’s society; to shun one.” For our purposes no meaning may be given the word that conflicts with its use by the holy writers in Scripture. Above all, there dare be added to the meaning of the word no human opinion or judgment based upon theological prejudice or an evaluation of certain existing conditions. The word is used three times by the holy writers (Ro 3:12; 16:17; and 1 Pe 3:11). A study of these passages will confirm the point affirmed in the thesis above, that an initial break is basic to the meaning of the verb, and the point rejected in the antithesis, that the verb means a “leaning away” while still maintaining the former contact. Before proceeding to the passages one can add that the prefix ἐκ alone implies such a meaning, which is strengthened in the chief passage under consideration by the separating preposition ἀπό

St. Paul uses ἐκκλίνω in Romans 3:12. Beginning in chapter one Paul shows that both the Gentile and the Jewish world are hopeless victims of sin. He sums up his elaborate development in 3:9 when he writes, “We have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin.” That is a broad and all-inclusive judgment. For support Paul goes to the Old Testament, to the familiar Psalm 14. In verse 12 he quotes verse 3 of the psalm, “They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” The former and preceding condition that is presupposed here is the state of innocency when God created man in his own image. The going aside, expressed by ἐξέκλιναν, is the break away from the original state of righteousness and purity, which is apparent in the lives of all men. That break was complete, so complete that all mankind is now under the curse of original sin which accounts for all actual sin. The thought of a “leaning away” while still maintaining any part of the former and preceding condition makes one guilty of endorsing Pelagianism. The use of the verb here demands a clean cut, a severance, a cleavage, a break with the former condition.

St. Peter also uses the verb ἐκκλίνω in his first epistle, chapter 3, verse 11. In this section Peter is exhorting Christians to sanctification. In so doing he quotes from Psalm 34:15, “Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it.” Here the former course of action is “doing evil.” The verb demands a break with this course of action. The positive command to do good presupposes a previous break with evil. The thought of a “leaning away” from evil while still maintaining contact with the evil and at the same time doing good is impossible. The ἐκκλίνω demands as basic for its meaning an initial break, a point of cleavage, with something former and preceding.

St. Paul also uses ἐκκλίνω in the passage that is our chief concern at the moment, Romans 16:17. After urging the Romans to mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine, Paul continues with the admonition, “avoid them.” Here the break is away from the former fellowship relation expressed by the salutation with the holy kiss. The “break” idea of the verb is here strengthened by a second “break-away” preposition, the ἀπό. The thought of a “leaning away” while still maintaining fellowship, a sort of a half-hearted spiritual embrace without the holy kiss, is contrary to the usage of the word in Scripture and nullifies the warning of the Lord.

It is interesting to note that the use of ἐκκλίνω by the translators of the Septuagint confirms our thesis that the definition of the verb demands as basic an initial break. Consider Proverbs 3:7: “Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the Lord, and depart from evil.” The “depart” is the same Hebrew verb, סוּר, that St. Paul and St. Peter, following the Septuagint, with ἐκκλίνω. The Septuagint here also translates the “depart” with ἐκκλίνω. In this case the parallel is even more exact, for the verb is followed by the same separating preposition, ἀπό, as in our Romans 16:17 passage.

Another interesting passage is Proverbs 4:14-15: “Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, *turn* from it, and pass away.” In this case the idea of an initial break with a preceding course of action is expressed six times in three sets of compound synonymous parallel members. The holy writer heaps up expressions to impress the thought of the necessity of a complete break with evil and evil men. The Septuagint translators, whom we credit with having known their Greek, chose the verb ἐκκλίνω to put the thought across. The “*turn* from it,” which in the Hebrew is the synonym for סוּר, the שׁוּטָה, is translated ἐκκλινον, again followed by the ἀπό. We bring this interesting corroborative evidence just to show that we are not trying to force the language to establish a point, but are just letting the language speak, confident that the point will thereby be established!

We affirm:

- 2. that the object of ἀπό is “them” – the persons causing divisions and offenses, not the evil part of them.**

We reject:

- 2. the changing of the object of ἀπό, “them,” to “that which is evil in them.”**

The English translation renders “them” as the direct object of the verb, avoid. The translators translated correctly according to the sense of the Greek text. The German translation follows the Greek text more literally, translating the prepositional phrase ἀπ’ αὐτῶν, “und weichet von denselben.” The Greek text has a prepositional phrase modifying the verb. This is translated literally in the German, whereas in the English the object of the preposition is rendered as the object of the verb. The sense is the same because those to be avoided remain the ones causing divisions and offenses, and the object of the verb does not affect the meaning of the verb.

One of the speakers at the New Ulm Convention, however, changed the “them,” making it partitive, referring to the errors held by persons rather than the persons themselves. St. Paul does not say that we are to avoid that which causes divisions and offenses, the evil, the sins, the errors in doctrine and practice of certain people, while failing to avoid those people. No, we are to avoid the people, them, the persons causing divisions and offenses. Such a false and unwarranted change in the text of St. Paul would make fellowship possible with almost any errorists, just as long as their errors were avoided. This change in the text nullifies the warning of the Lord. St. Paul doesn’t separate the divisions and offenses from the people causing them.

We affirm:

- 3. that the nature of the “avoid” is the severance of church fellowship, that is, pulpit, altar, and prayer fellowship.**

We reject:

- 3. any “avoiding” that still admits of the practice of church fellowship.**

We have already indicated the nature of the avoiding to be the severance of church fellowship. This is obvious from the context. The entire chapter sixteen up to our passage is filled with greetings. These are not greetings to people who have but friendship in common. They are “fraternal greetings.” Such a salutation was commonly sealed by the holy kiss. The fraternal greeting sealed with the holy kiss is common in the epistles and

known from extra-biblical sources to have been common in the early church. The atmosphere of fellowship is expressed in verse 16, “Salute one another with an holy kiss. The churches of Christ salute you.” From the joyful company of those who “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers,”(Acts 2:42) Paul turns to those “causing divisions and offenses.” The admonition is as simple as it is brief – avoid, that is, have no fellowship. By fellowship we mean what we commonly term church fellowship, that is, pulpit, altar, and prayer fellowship. The avoiding has no reference to the social, political, or business spheres of life. Our Lord does not command us to leave this world, but to remain in it while not being a part of it.

We reject any “avoiding” that still admits of the practice of church fellowship. Church fellowship involves matters other than public preaching, the celebrating of holy communion, and praying. I have in mind matters like transfers from one congregation to another, sponsors, guest organists and soloists, etc. To limit the “avoiding” to an avoiding of the formal practice of joint preaching and communion services and prayer fellowship while permitting fraternal transfers, sponsors, guest organists and soloists, and other incidental types of fellowship, is to contradict, confuse, and destroy the “avoiding.” When I can no longer preach, commune, and pray with someone, I can no longer transfer to such a one, have him serve as sponsor, organist, soloist, or in any other capacity that involves the practice of church fellowship.

However, a warning must be sounded at this points. We are here laying down a principle. We are not trying to and cannot solve all individual cases that may and will arise with the declaration of the severance of church fellowship. The directive of the Word of God in Romans 16:17 must be applied, not in a legalistic manner, but an evangelical manner as any and every other Word of God. That means patient instruction and loving concern for the weak. We will have to work with this lord of the Lord in the same manner that we labor with other commands such as, “This do ye off” regarding communion attendance; “Let the Word of God dwell in you richly” regarding church attendance; “We love Him, for He first loved us” regarding stewardship; “Ye fathers, bring up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” as applied to the Christian Day School. The Lord does not want us to *drive* his people with the Word but to *change* his people by the Word so that their will becomes the will to obey the Word of the Lord. But let no man use the example of the weak among us, the confused, the difficulty of cases that shall arise as grounds for either disobedience or a postponement of obedience to this passage. Anyone who argues in this manner would fall under the judgment of the Lord, Matthew 23:24: “Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.” Let us rather pray God for the grace to obey, and then for grace to teach others to obey!

Speak, O Lord, Thy servant heareth,
To Thy Word I now give heed;
Life and spirit Thy Word beareth,
All Thy Word is true indeed.
Death’s dread pow’r in me is rife;
Jesus, may Thy Word of Life
Fill my soul with love’s strong fervor
That I cling to Thee forever.

Hymn 296, S. 1 (TLH)

IV. On the identity of the Missouri Synod as “ποιοῦντας”

We affirm:

1. that Missouri’s persistent and militant rejection of admonition and her defense of errors in doctrine and practice in the face of the intense, earnest efforts of our synod since 1939, and the plain and unequivocal indictments of Missouri by our convention of ’51, ’53, and ’55 remove all legitimate doubt as to the question of Missouri’s being a causer of divisions and offenses.

We reject:

1. the plea that the Missouri Synod has not yet been convincingly proven to be persistent in causing divisions and offenses and that additional admonition is demanded of us in love before love avoids.

I have no intention of furnishing elaborate and detailed proof from recent church history that the Missouri Synod is now and has been for some time causing divisions and offenses. The case against her is a matter of history. All has been done out in the open, not in a dark corner. There always have been those and always will be those who claim to be unable on the basis of history to identify the pope as the Great Antichrist. And so there are those among us who still claim to be unable on the basis of the last twenty years of church history to identify Missouri as “causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine.” For such the word of Dr. F. Pieper, quoted in the 1948 Memorial to the Synodical Conference, applies: “Suppose two men stand at noonday in the bright light of the sun, and one says it is dark like the night! Such a man cannot be helped; something that he ought to have is lacking.”

However, a few remarks may yet be made to elaborate our statements. Who can deny that we, as a synod, have been patiently and lovingly admonishing the Missouri Synod since 1939 through official resolutions and communications, by essays and debate at Synodical Conference convention, through our elaborate and expensive series of tracts, and in almost endless committee meetings? What has been the impact of all this admonition on Missouri? We have met with a blanket denial of all charges. Yea more, Missouri’s false position in doctrine and practice has been most militantly, and we fear effectively, carried to us by their conventions, essays at Synodical Conference conventions, by their counter tracts and pamphlets, by their men in committee meetings, and by their continued public church policy. Add to this the fact that Missouri has founded “sister opposition” congregations in order to maintain their false position on scouting, chaplaincy, and other matters, that they have split some of our congregations in the interest of their false position, and that they continue in this form of “mission work.” What does it all add up to? Simply this that that Missouri has persistently and militantly rejected our admonition and even as persistently and militantly defended and made propaganda for her errors.

What has been the effect of this situation upon our synod in convention assembled? When one reads the reports of the 1951 convention, one is repeatedly confronted by the expressed determination to carry all matters to the forum of the Synodical Conference. We were thoroughly dissatisfied with the answer we received to our letter of 1949 regarding the many various manifestations of unionism in Missouri. Of scouting we said that Missouri’s reply “holds forth no hope of a settlement on this vexing problem,” and that “this matter will brook no further delay.” Regarding the *Common Confession* we stated that its adoption by Missouri “involves an untruth and creates a basically untruthful situation since this action has been officially interpreted as a settlement of past differences which are in fact not settled.” We asked Missouri “to repudiate its stand that the *Common Confession* is a settlement of the doctrines treated by the two committees.”

In 1953 our Standing Committee brought to the convention this judgment: “We hold that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod...has disrupted the Synodical Conference and made it impossible for us to continue our affiliation with the Missouri Synod and our joint labors in the service of the Lord.” The Floor Committee report, which was unanimously adopted, stated: “we declare that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod...has brought

about the present break in relations that is now threatening the existence of the Synodical Conference and the continuance of our affiliation with the sister synod.”

When we come to our 1955 convention, we find that our Standing Committee came to the convention with the following resolution: “That with deepest sorrow, taking notice of the fact that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, we, in obedience to God’s injunction to avoid such, declare the fellowship which we have had with said synod to be terminated.” The Preamble of the Floor Committee, which was unanimously adopted, spoke this kind of language, “A church body which creates divisions and offenses by its official resolutions, policies, and practices not in accord with Scripture also becomes subject to the indictment of Romans 16:17-18. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod *has* by its official resolutions, policies, and practice created divisions and offenses both in her own body and in the entire Synodical Conference. Such divisions and offenses are of long standing.”

In view of all this we repeat that there can no longer be legitimate doubt as to the question of Missouri’s being a causer of divisions and offenses. We emphatically reject the contention that additional admonition is demanded of us in love before love avoids.

We affirm:

- 2. that God’s directive, “Mark...avoid,” admits of no delay when the erring reveal themselves to be causers of divisions and offenses.**

We reject:

- 2. as sophistry any argument that the “avoiding” must be deferred until all hope of regaining the erring is extinguished.**

The Missouri Synod has revealed itself to be a causer of divisions and offenses. We have publicly declared her to be such. Yet we have refused to avoid her. Why? There is the opinion that we dare not obey our God when He says, “avoid,” until all hope of regaining the erring is extinguished. At the New Ulm convention we heard the passionate plea, “Wait until the committees have met. Give them a chance.” Others argue that the Missouri convention of 1956 has established a better basis, a working basis, for the possible future re-establishing of the unity of the spirit. We reject such argumentation as sophistry. Where in God’s Word does God give us the right to disobey *now* because of the possibility of a change in the situation in the *future*? Certainly we hope that Missouri will return to the old paths so that those hundreds of thousands of simple Christians in her midst will not be lead so far along the path of liberalism that they will suffer the complete loss of the truth. But that hope within me dare not prevent me from obeying a specific Word of the Lord that applies *now*. If it does, then that hope is of the flesh and of the devil. The same applies to love. If love becomes the grounds for disobedience, then such love is not the true love of the Word and of the brother, but a love which springs from the flesh and is of the devil. To obey always has been, ever is, and always shall be better than sacrifice. Our God says, “Mark and avoid.” He does not say, “Mark, wait and see, live in hope, and if at length all fails and hope is finally extinguished, then resign yourselves and avoid.” Our God had good reason for not so speaking, for he knew that if he would spark in that way, the time for avoiding would never come, for his people would be weakened by constant contact with the erring to the point of inability to act. Our God knows the fearful truthfulness of what the would-be strong among us seem to doubt, “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.”

Now may the Lord in his grace and mercy bless this work of love to a simple understanding of this clear word, to a humble, child-like obedience of the same, and to the re-establishment of the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace among us.

Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word;
Curb those who fain by craft and sword
Would wrest the Kingdom from Thy Son
And set at naught all He hath done.

Hymn 261, S. 1 (TLH)