

THE DOCTRINAL BASIS FOR THE FORMATION OF THE CLC

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## THE DOCTRINAL BASIS FOR THE FORMATION OF THE CLC

Since we in the Wisconsin Synod firmly believe that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God, we take the Lord's command, "Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it," (Dt 4:2) very seriously. This command also covers what He has told us in regard to our relationships to people who teach something other than what He has told us in His Word. This is why our doctrine of fellowship literally sets us apart from many others who also claim that they are "Christian." We firmly believe that there must be full agreement in all doctrines for us to join our hands in fellowship with any church body. This goes contrary to the popular opinion which says that church bodies can agree to disagree in certain non-fundamental doctrines as long as they are agreed in the fundamental doctrines of the Bible. When such people say that we are too strict in our interpretation of Jesus' commands, we are not affected by such charges very much because we can read Jesus' commands again and clearly see that we are following what He has commanded us to do for our own good. But on the other side of the coin, there are the members of the Church of the Lutheran Confession who say that we have a false teaching in our doctrine of fellowship for we are not doing what the clear Word tells us to do. This may make us feel quite uncomfortable to hear this charge raised against us since we do want to teach only what the Bible reveals to us. So it is the doctrine of fellowship which is at the base of what keeps the CLC and the WELS apart. Therefore in this paper we wish to consider what led certain members of the Wisconsin Synod to feel that we have a false teaching in our doctrine of fellowship so that they felt constrained to withdraw from us and form the Church of the Lutheran Confession.

In order to understand this, one must keep the historical background in mind. We need to go back to 1938 when the Delegate Convention of the Missouri Synod adopted a resolution which stated that two documents would serve as a basis for fellowship between the American Lutheran Church and the Missouri Synod, these documents being the "Declaration of the Representatives of the American Lutheran Church" and the "Brief Statement" of the Missouri Synod. This resolution did not say that these two synods were now in fellowship, but was to serve as the basis for the establishing of fellowship. By adopting this resolution, the Missouri Synod said that they would allow some variance of teaching in the ALC in such non-fundamental doctrines as the antichrist, the conversion of the Jews, a physical resurrection of the martyrs before judgment day, and that the fulfillment of the thousand years of Revelation 20 could lie in the past or in the future.<sup>1</sup> The Wisconsin Synod immediately

replied that this was a departure from the Missouri Synod's former teaching that there must be full agreement in all doctrines of the Bible before there could be fellowship between two church bodies. However, the Missouri Synod never retreated from this new position. Yet they did see that there could not be fellowship between them and the ALC with these two documents as the base, so they worked together with the ALC to prepare the "Common Confession" which was adopted by the 1950 convention of the Missouri Synod as a settlement of the past differences which had existed between the Missouri Synod and the ALC. At our own convention in 1951 this "Common Confession" was carefully studied and then

our delegates in convention unanimously declared "That we not only find the Common Confession to be inadequate in the points noted (cf. Review of the Common Confession), but that we also hold that the adoption of the Common Confession by the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod involves an untruth and creates a basically untruthful situation since this action has been officially interpreted as a settlement of past differences which in fact are not settled." At the same time we asked the Missouri Synod to repudiate its stand that the Common Confession is a proper settlement."

In response to our dissatisfaction with the Common Confession, the Missouri Synod began to prepare Part 2 which was to clarify any points that seemed to be unclear in Part 1. Yet they insisted that Part 1 was not being repudiated. So in spite of the pleading of our synod (and others), Missouri was still clinging to the points which we had objected to, claiming that our charges were unfounded.

That our synod took this very seriously can be seen from Point 1 of our resolutions from the convention in 1953:

That we declare that the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod  
 a) by reaffirming its acceptance of the Common Confession as a settlement of past differences which are in fact not settled (Proceedings, 1950, p. 147), and  
 b) by its persistent adherence to its unionistic practices [here follows a listing of such practices],  
 has brought about the present break in relations that is threatening the existence of the Synodical Conference and the continuance of our affiliation with our sister synod. (Proceedings, 1953, p. 104)

By such resolutions and also the floor discussions made it quite plain to President Behnken and other representatives of the Missouri Synod how critical the state of fraternal relations actually was between the two synods. This caused President Behnken to offer to get together in a meeting to find a God-pleasing solution to the break in relations which our synod spoke in Point 1. This in turn led to the addition of Point 6:

While during the period up to the next meeting of the Synodical

Conference we, in view of President Behnken's offer, still anxiously and prayerfully await an indication that The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod will not persist in its present stand as set forth in Point 1, we remain in a state of confession. (Proceedings, 1953, p. 105)

Up to this time, it seems that there was general agreement in our synod that we were pursuing the correct, God-pleasing course of action in dealing with the errors which had cropped up in the Missouri Synod. But this began to change at the convention held in 1955. The talks which President Behnken had asked for had not produced the results that we had hoped for, so the question of whether now was the time to break fellowship with the Missouri Synod again faced the delegates to the convention. The President of our Synod stated in his report:

The differences that have arisen between us, which we have been trying to remove in an evangelical manner by the application of God's Holy Word, brother to brother, have not been removed. They have increased. Things we consider contrary to God's Word have been defended with the statement, 'That passage does not apply in this case.' We have heard so often the expression 'Synod's interests are sufficiently safeguarded.' Matters which we named in our resolutions of 1953, which we considered dangerous to our souls' welfare, deterrent to our Gospel ministry, and detrimental to our fellowship in the Conference, have been and still are vigorously defended. The charges which we brought in an effort to do our brotherly duty before God, have been definitely denied. 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!'. . . 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 now have us apply His definite command "Avoid them!" or whether we still have an unpaid debt of love to those whose fellowship we cherished so many years. (Report, p. 13,14)

This feeling of having to "avoid" Missouri at this time was also reflected in many of the reports which were presented to the convention. Finally the Floor Committee made its resolution that "we, in obedience to the command of our Lord in Romans 16:17-18, terminate our fellowship with the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod." (Proceedings, p. 86) Yet, since the Missouri Synod met in convention every three years, it had not met since our 1953 convention, and so could not act officially on the resolutions which we had passed in that convention. Since they would not meet until 1956, there was a stipulation attached to this resolution that it be presented to a recessed convention to be held after Missouri had held its convention in 1956. We then continued our protesting fellowship with Missouri until that time.

It was this action of our synod that caused some of our members to begin

to withdraw from our synod. It was there contention that since we had "marked" the Missouri Synod as "causing divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which you have learned," we were being disobedient to the Lord's command to "avoid them." When the 1957 convention still saw some reason to hope for the eventual settlement of the differences and thus defeated a resolution to terminate fellowship, it continued our "vigorously protesting fellowship" while we sought to restore full unity between the two synods. This same action was again repeated in 1959. Because of this delay in breaking fellowship, individuals and congregations felt constrained to withdraw from the Wisconsin Synod. Eventually these, as well as some from the Norwegian Synod (ELS) and some from the Missouri Synod, joined together to form the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) in 1960-61.

With this brief historical background, we may now begin to look at the doctrinal difference that separates the CLC from the Wisconsin Synod. At the very heart of the matter is the way in which the passage of Romans 16:17 is to be applied. There is no disagreement in applying this passage to people with whom we are not yet in fellowship, for we both say that there must be full and complete agreement in all the doctrines of the Bible for the establishment of fellowship with such people. But there is a disagreement of how this is to be applied to a situation in which one with whom we have been in fellowship begins to stray from the truth. There is also agreement on how to apply this when we are dealing only with a single individual or just a couple of people, but the problem comes when we are dealing with a whole church body. This area of disagreement has been described by the CLC like this:

The disagreement revolves about the problem of identifying people as errorists when they arise among brethren. The WEIS seems to contend that the disagreement is a matter of human judgment as to WHEN the conviction or judgment is reached that those who have introduced error come under the indictment of Rom. 16:17-18--that is, become such who are "causing divisions and offences" in the church and so must be "avoided." The CLC contends that the disagreement is not a matter of human judgment as to the WHEN but rather a matter of disagreement as to HOW a person or persons are to be identified as such who are "causing divisions and offences," and hence must be "avoided."<sup>3</sup>

In other words, there is a disagreement over the place of brotherly admonition before there is a necessity of breaking fellowship with another church body.

The CLC states very definitely that there is no room for admonition in Romans 16:17.

The CLC position is the most controverted point of all, that of separation from those with whom one has been in fellowship, is, briefly stated, this that as soon as we spot a person or church

body "causing divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine ye have learned", we are not only to "mark", but also to "avoid" them. The marking and the avoiding are to be simultaneous.

Because of this position which they hold to, they are often said to be against admonition when they see that a person or a church body has fallen into an error. However, this is not quite true. They do say that there is a definite place for admonition. To prove this, a longer quote is in order.

. . . We are speaking of a church body with which one has been in fellowship for many years, and which by a tragic chain of events has fallen into error. What shall be done in such a case?

In answering this question one must keep in mind that synods do not change overnight from a position of unquestioned orthodoxy to one of false doctrine and practice. That will be a gradual process beginning with individuals in the body. There will perhaps be disturbing incidents of deviation from principles and practice on which there had once been agreement. There may be occasional pronouncements by this or that person, pronouncements that fill one with increasing concern. Yet one trusts that the sister synod will be capable of dealing with these individual deviations and willing to do so, that it will speedily fulfill its obligation of brotherly admonition toward its members. But if and when it becomes obvious that there has been a breakdown of such doctrinal discipline, then it becomes the duty of brethren in the other synod to inquire and eventually to admonish the synod itself. Even then it will not be easy to determine whether these incidents really reflect a change of position on the part of the sister synod. But if that should be the case, this change will begin to appear also in its official pronouncements, in certain resolutions, in the actions taken on some particular committee reports, in the official decisions on various appeals, etc. So again there will inquiry whether those resolutions, those pronouncements, those decisions really mean what they seem to say. And in connection with this inquiry there will of course be admonition, a whole-hearted, singleminded, sincere effort, having but one goal--that the Truth may be served. That effort must be made, else all previous expressions of fellowship would be sheer hypocrisy. Yet it must be a patient, prayerful effort. There dare be no thought of "When do we get to Romans 16?" The admonition must be thoroughly Scripture-based, and offered in the spirit of meekness. It must be relevant to the issue, it must be directed to the responsible persons, those whom the body has chosen as the ones by which it wants to be represented in such matters.

When such efforts at brotherly admonition have been made and have nevertheless been rejected--whether in so many words or by deliberate adherence to the error--then one must come to the reluctant conclusion that this is indeed the very situation which the Apostle had in mind, that one is dealing with causers of divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine that we have learned.

It is this rejection of admonition that has made the identification not only possible but positive. Now one can "mark" with certainty. Now nothing is to be gained by further delay, by a process of marking. . .

That is our position on admonition. We maintain indeed that it does not belong into the procedure that Paul here outlines for a very specific kind of situation. For this we offer no

defense beyond the plain fact that Paul is simply not speaking of admonition in this text. Yet we insist that we believe in admonition, practice admonition, demand admonition--but in its proper place.<sup>5</sup>

From this we can easily see that the CLC does in fact say that admonition has a definite place in their midst. From this quote it would also appear that there is no real difference between our position and the position of the CLC. So then what is it that is keeping us apart?

While it seems that we are in agreement on the principles which Holy Scripture sets forth for us to follow in breaking an established fellowship, a definite difference appears when these principles are put into practice. The CLC maintains that a false teaching arose among the members of the Wisconsin Synod during the years of 1955-61, and they say that this can be proved from the official resolutions and actions of the synod during these years. They say that at the first sign of error in the Missouri Synod in 1939, the Wisconsin Synod reacted immediately. But they claim that as time wore on a change began to take place.

The tempo and intensity of testifying against the errors of Missouri increased in both the WELS and the ELS. Intersynodical relations became THE ISSUE. But a new dimension appeared in the struggle--the split between those who wanted to continue testifying in words and those who felt it was high time, or long past time, for such testifying to be converted into the testimony of action--the "avoiding" of Missouri who was openly teaching otherwise than God's Word teaches and so was guilty of causing divisions in the church.<sup>6</sup>

This split in the Wisconsin Synod became evident when in its 1955 convention it recognized that Missouri was a causer of divisions and offenses, but still delayed action on the termination of fellowship until the recessed convention in 1956. This caused some to bring charges against the Wisconsin Synod that she was being disobedient to the Lord's command of Romans 16. The convention had delayed action because many had not reached the conviction that further admonition would be fruitless. In pointing out the source of Wisconsin's error, the CLC pointed to a convention newsletter and then added a paragraph of its own:

"Agreement on the fact that Romans 16:17-18 applied to the situation in the Missouri Synod was almost unanimous. The divisions and offenses are clear. There was an honest difference of opinion whether it was necessary to break relations completely with the Missouri Synod now or: whether we, in the words of our President, 'still have an unpaid debt of love to those whose fellowship we have cherished so many years.'"

This approach to the issue made Scripture equivocal. It says, in effect, that Scripture placed the Synod in a dilemma. Toward its solution, one set of Scripture passages is pitted against another. The clarity and authority of Scripture is thus undermined.<sup>7</sup>

Since there was not unity in our midst about when it was necessary for us to break our fellowship with the Missouri Synod, the CLC also raised the charge against us that we were a unionistic body--we were allowing a difference of opinion on a doctrinal matter in our midst without doing anything to correct it.<sup>8</sup>

Because of these teachings of the Wisconsin Synod, a number of people withdrew from our fellowship and formed the CLC. When they formed their constitution for their synod, they included a doctrinal statement called "Concerning...Church Fellowship." In this document, this statement is found which summarizes the reason why they felt that they had to form their synod:

46 We further believe, teach and confess that established fellowships or existing fellowships are to be terminated when it has been ascertained that a person or group through a false position is causing divisions and offenses in the Church.\* Among our Lutheran teachers who have held a firm and Scriptural position in regard to making no alliances with those who deviate from the Word, there are some who have shown the same humanistic weakness of the unionist when the matter occurred of separating from those with whom there has been fellowship of long standing.

\*(footnote) The place of brotherly admonition in the mutual relations of Christian brethren is discussed later in this article... It does not belong to the essence of the principles stated below.

Even after the Wisconsin Synod broke its fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1961, that did not remove the problems which the CLC saw in our doctrine of fellowship. In its report to its own convention after we had suspended fellowship with Missouri, these three charges were still brought against our synod:

1) The Wisconsin Synod, in delaying its break with the Missouri Synod, developed a false doctrine of church fellowship; 2) The essence of the false doctrine of fellowship held by the Wisconsin Synod is that it placed the setting of the time for a break in the realm of "sanctified Christian judgment;" and 3) the size of the minority vote in the vote to suspend relations with the Missouri Board, 49-129, indicates that the Wisconsin Synod is not united on the doctrine of church fellowship. "The Wisconsin Synod in itself continues as a unionistic body." Only a unanimous vote would eliminate this charge.<sup>9</sup>

These differences continue to this day, and, despite several meetings with each other, have not been able to be resolved.

So far, this paper has dealt mainly with the CLC's reasons for leaving our synod and forming their own. This paper tried to be fairly objective in doing this, even though that is not entirely possible. Now, however, the reasons for the actions of the Wisconsin Synod need to be taken up in order to present a full picture of this period. The charge was brought against us that we were not obeying the Lord's command to "avoid" a false teacher when



it became evident that she was teaching false doctrine. Yet there are still two principles which must govern our dealing with those whom we regard as our brothers in the faith. One is definitely this marking and avoiding of false teachers. But that is not to override the great debt of love which we owe to those brothers. "Conscientious recognition of both principles will lead to an evangelical practice also in meeting many difficult situations which properly lie in the field of casuistry."<sup>10</sup> With this in mind, let us go back and look at several of the conventions, and see why our synod acted in the way in which it did. When the resolution to terminate fellowship with Missouri in 1955 was delayed until 1956, this was done because the Missouri Synod had not met in convention since our 1953 convention in which we charged Missouri with unionistic practices, and we wished to see what her<sup>official</sup> response to those charges would be. When there was still a ray of hope left after their convention in 1956 that the differences in doctrine might be able to be worked out, this resolution was not passed. After both the 1957 and 1959 conventions, there was also some hope that these differences could be worked out in the forum that was being held in the Synodical Conference to work out all differences in doctrine. Because of this hope that all differences might be worked out, the majority felt that in love they would wait with suspending fellowship, but would continue a vigorously protesting fellowship to show that we did not agree with the false teaching that was being allowed in the Missouri Synod. It was only after this hope was gone when these meetings could not work out the differences in doctrine that the resolution to break with Missouri finally passed.

In the meetings with the CIC after we finally broke with Missouri, they said that we were wrong to continue our state of confession as long as we did.

Their contention that there is not scriptural warrant "for a state of confession in dealing with the situations in which error in doctrine or practice has infested a larger group of confessional brethren (e.g., congregation or sister synod)." Over against this our men held that "such a state of confession is frequently called for before terminating fellowship with a group that has been infected by error," and this for the following reasons:

"1. In order to offer opportunity for determining what the confessional position of the group for which it must be held responsible really is (this may become necessary because of mutually exclusive statements, pronouncements, resolutions made in such a group; because of conflicting positions contending for mastery in this group, one or the other of which may for good reasons be considered to be only temporarily in control);

"2. To offer opportunity to bring Scriptural testimony against the error infecting the group to those brethren who are not themselves advocating and propagating the errors--before treating such brethren as

responsible partakers of the error or false practice infecting the group."

Our representatives held such a procedure to be called for "to satisfy the many Scriptural injunctions quoted in the (Wis. Synod) Church Fellowship Statement bidding us to exercise and make earnest effort to preserve the bond of confessional fellowship, to help the weak and the confused."<sup>11</sup>

There was not a difference in doctrine that evidenced itself in the size of the minority vote on the resolution to break with Missouri, but they felt that we still had a debt of love to pay to the Missouri Synod. When we say that we have two principles to follow in conditions such as this, we are not denying the clarity of Scripture, nor are we making the Lord's commands subject to human judgment. We are simply trying to use our best sanctified, Christian judgment in which of the two principles to apply at a given point in time. Both principles are true, and both must be applied at the proper time. The Lord has not given us a set formula to follow with step by step instructions, but rather has just given us specific principles to follow without making them an exact formula.

I do not wish to cast judgment on the actions of the members of the CLC, for I firmly believe that they acted in good conscience. They may have been correct that we waited much too long to break with Missouri. That I am not able to tell. But the charges which they have brought against us do seem to be rather harsh. As sinful human beings still in this world, we will always be sinning. Maybe we did not follow the Lord's injunction to mark and avoid as soon as we should have, but if I were to err in one direction or the other, I would prefer to err in the direction of giving patient and loving admonition too long (as long as there was still hope that this might produce some good results) rather than erring in the direction of marking and avoiding a former brother before every avenue of bringing back to the truth of the Word has been tried. This latter danger seems to be what the CLC may be prone to do rather than the former.

## E N D   N O T E S

- <sup>1</sup>John Meyer, "Resolutions on Church Union," (WLQ, vol. 35, Oct. 1938), p. 285f.
- <sup>2</sup>W. O. Pless, "Historical Background of the Present Issues Between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods," Oct. 1953, p. 4.
- <sup>3</sup>Paul F. Nolting, "Mark...Avoid," 1970, p. 12.
- <sup>4</sup>Theodore Aaberg, "The CLC on 'Church Fellowship' Book Review," (Lutheran Synod Quarterly, June 1962), p. 20.
- <sup>5</sup>Edmund Reim, "Admonition and Romans 16," (Journal of Theology, Dec. 1962), p. 7-8.
- <sup>6</sup>Paul F. Nolting, "Mark...Avoid," 1970, p. 7.
- <sup>7</sup>Paul Albrecht, "What separates the CLC from Wisconsin?" (The Lutheran Spokesman, June 1962), p. 11.
- <sup>8</sup>Gilbert Sykow, "The Things that Come to Pass," (The Lutheran Spokesman, Sept. 1961), p. 8.
- <sup>9</sup>Reichwald, "CLC Convention," (Lutheran Synod Quarterly, Sept. 1961), p. 30.
- <sup>10</sup>Carl Lawrenz, "The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship," (WLQ, vol. 51, Oct. 1954), p. 290.
- <sup>11</sup>Gerald Hoenecke, "Recent Meeting of the Board of Doctrine of the Church of the Lutheran Confession and the Commission on Doctrinal Matters of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," (WLQ, vol. 69, Oct. 1972), p. 282.

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