

THE WELS AND THE CLC: IS THERE A DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCE?

Over the years there has been considerable, on-going debate about whether there is a difference of doctrine between the WELS and the CLC, or whether there is disagreement about the application of the doctrine of church fellowship to the termination of fellowship with the Missouri Synod. Since the question seemingly is as far from resolution as ever, we will revisit it one more time.¹

Those who felt that there was a difference of doctrine usually identified that difference as a failure on the part of the CLC to allow for admonition before termination of fellowship with an erring church or as a willingness on the part of WELS to remain in fellowship with an erring church body, even after it had been identified as persisting in its error. For this reason, the 1987-1990 talks between representatives of the WELS and ELS and the CLC focused on the role of admonition in termination of fellowship with an erring church body.

Points of Agreement in the 1987-1990 Talks

In a joint statement the representatives of the WELS, the ELS, and the CLC agreed with the following principles:

Admonition continues until the erring individual or group either repents of its error and turns away from it or until it shows itself to be persistent in its error by adhering to it in its public doctrine and practice, by demanding recognition for it, or by making propaganda for and trying to persuade others of it.

Both groups agreed on the necessity of admonition before the termination of fellowship. Both groups also accepted the following statements on the purpose and limited duration of the admonition:

The imperative *ekklinatē* calls for a clean break of fellowship with those who persistently adhere to error. When it has been ascertained that a person or church body is causing divisions and offenses . . . by teaching contrary to Holy Scriptures, the directive to avoid is as binding as any word addressed to us by our Savior in his holy Word. Pleading a debt of love dare not serve as an excuse for putting off a break of fellowship with those who have shown themselves to be not weak brethren but persistent errorists. . . . We reject the view that the decision to continue or discontinue admonition and proceed to avoid is to be made on the basis

¹This article and the preceding article were independently submitted by the authors, one reacting to a recent CLC convention, one reacting to recent CLC publications. Although there is a degree of overlap between them, we have run them both because they give two perspectives on a question that persists for members of the WELS and CLC and that seems no closer to resolution than it was forty years ago—in spite of the recent Joint Statement.

of a subjective human judgement or conjecture about the possible outcome of the admonition. . . . We reject the view that permits the use of human judgement to prolong fellowship with persistent errorists as contrary to Scripture.

In response to the CLC's request for a preamble to deal with past statements of the respective synods and of individuals within them, the WELS representatives suggested a preamble which included these words:

This Joint Statement, therefore, when accepted by our three church bodies, supersedes any and every previous statement that might be or might appear to be in conflict with this document. Any and all such conflicting or possibly conflicting statements are herewith disavowed.

It is on the basis of this agreement, which recognized both the need for admonition and the need for immediate termination of fellowship with persistent errorists, that the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations concluded that there was no difference of doctrine between the WELS and CLC. When our commission asked the CLC representatives for the basis of their assertion that there is a doctrinal difference between the CLC and WELS, they did not provide a simple direct answer, but merely provided copies of old documents.

Subsequent Explanations

Since the CLC broke off the negotiations with WELS in 1990, the question "What is the doctrinal difference?" has kept popping up both in the CLC and the WELS. WELS representatives have maintained that if the CLC really accepts the principles which their representatives agreed to in the 1990 statement, there is no disagreement in doctrine.

In response to the continuing questions several documents from CLC sources have attempted to provide a basis for the claim that such a doctrinal difference exists.

In response to a request from a CLC congregation in Albuquerque, NM, that the CLC state what the doctrinal difference is, the CLC's 1994 convention adopted the following statements:

Whereas, the WELS, having already "marked" the LC-MS in 1955 as a causer of divisions and offenses, nevertheless at its 1959 convention adopted the following principle on the Termination of Church Fellowship: "Termination of church fellowship is called for when you have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail and that the erring brother or church body demands recognition of its error," and

Whereas, the CLC holds to the scriptural principle set forth in its official publication, "Concerning Church Fellowship," which says: "We further believe and teach that suspension of an established fellowship is to take place when it has been ascertained that a person or group is causing divisions and offenses through a false position in doctrine or practice" therefore, be it

Resolved, that we let the doctrinal contrast between these two official statements from the respective church bodies stand as our answer to the memorial of Holy Spirit congregation of Albuquerque, NM. (For the full resolution see CLC proceedings, p 66-67).

It is as though the CLC-WLS-ELS meeting had never taken place. The term "marked" is used in a sense it does not have in Scripture, and the WELS position is inadequately represented by the detachment of a single sentence from its context. The CLC statement does not even mention admonition of the errorist, which was the focal point of the 1987-1990 discussions.

The 1994 convention statement omits analysis of the WELS statement, but the misinterpretation of the WELS position is more direct in a 1994 essay by John Lau. Lau refers to the same quotation from the WLS 1959 convention cited above, but paraphrases the WELS position in this way: "It is wrong to avoid in this way only when we come to some sort of subjective judgment that admonition will *never* be heeded (as the WELS and ELS falsely teach)" [Emphasis added] (p 32). That this is a caricature of the WELS position should be apparent to anyone who has read the Joint Statement of the WELS-ELS-CLC meetings or past WELS statements in their entirety.

A 1994 conference essay by CLC pastor Michael Wilke summarized the WELS-ELS position as "mark, admonish, and avoid." We would have no problem with this as long as "mark" is properly understood as "watch out for," a point which was agreed upon in the 1990 statement. The CLC position is summarized as "mark and avoid" with no mention of admonition. The essay goes on to state that one basis for the assertion that WELS has a different doctrinal position than the CLC is that the WELS has never officially adopted the Joint Statement. But this is because the CLC broke off talks before their request for a preamble could be fulfilled by a jointly composed preamble. When the CLC refused further discussions, there was no reason to present the statement to the WELS convention for adoption. We accept the Joint Statement and would want to make it the starting point for any future negotiations.

The Latest Explanation

Apparently this issue cannot be laid to rest in the CLC since in the June 2000 issue of the *Journal of Theology* Michael Roehl makes another attempt to define the doctrinal difference. The article begins with some rather surprising admissions. Roehl's assessment of the situation begins with these words: "That there was a doctrinal difference between the WELS/ELS and *at least some of the men* who left and eventually formed the CLC is beyond dispute to any honest student of Scripture and history" [emphasis added]. A bit later Roehl cites a 1992 *JT* article which states, "Those who left the WELS in the years and months before the WELS 1959 convention did not leave the WELS

because of a stated different doctrinal principle. At that time both sides seemed to hold . . . the same principle. . . . Those who left before the 1959 WELS convention felt conscience bound to do so because the WELS was not following this principle." A bit later Roehl says that "it was not until the resolutions of the 1959 WELS convention that a difference in doctrine was identified. . . . The reason for not returning [to WELS] was the doctrinal difference brought to light in 1959. It was at this convention that the WELS officially adopted a false and unscriptural position on church fellowship and the meaning and application of Romans 16:17."

Roehl alleges that a new false doctrine was declared in the statement of the 1959 WELS convention:

Termination of church fellowship is called for when you have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail and that the erring brother or church body demands recognition of its error.

Let us compare this alleged false doctrine with the statement accepted by the CLC representatives to the 1987-1990 meetings.

Admonition continues until the erring individual or group either repents of its error and turns away from it or until it shows itself to be persistent in its error by adhering to it in its public doctrine and practice, by demanding recognition for it, or by making propaganda for and trying to persuade others of it.

We do not see any doctrinal difference between "admonition is of no further avail and that the erring brother or church body demands recognition of its error" and "the erring individual or group . . . shows itself to be persistent in its error by adhering to it in its public doctrine and practice, by demanding recognition for it." Both statements say that you admonish the errorist to establish that he is a persistent errorist. When this has been established you immediately separate from him as the previously cited quotation from the Joint Statement clearly says, "The imperative *ekkliniate* calls for a clean break of fellowship with those who persistently adhere to error. . . . We reject the view that permits the use of human judgement to prolong fellowship with persistent errorists as contrary to Scripture." This was the teaching of the WELS in 1959, in 1990, and it is the teaching today.

Roehl incorrectly summarizes the WELS position because of a faulty and inconsistent understanding of the term "mark" in Romans 16:17. The Joint Statement said:

"The present active infinitive *skopein*, meaning "to keep on watching out for," refers to Christians' ongoing activity of being constantly on the alert and on the lookout for those who are causing divisions and offense contrary to God's Word. . . . We reject the view that the verb *skopein* refers to labeling or branding those who have already been identified

as individuals or a church body causing divisions and offenses. The translation “mark” can be misleading.

In spite of this, CLC spokesmen persist in faulty and inconsistent interpretations of *skopein*. Roehl summarized the WELS and CLC positions thus:

WELS Position: 1.) Identify (*skopein*) the false teacher. 2.) Admonish him till an impasse is reached (having been convinced that admonition will be of no further avail). 3.) Avoid (*ekklinate*) the false teacher.

CLC Position: 1.) Admonish an erring brother, both to determine if he is indeed a false teacher (as opposed to a weak brother) and to turn him from his error. If he fails to heed that admonition and thus identifies himself as a “causer of divisions and offenses,” 2.) Mark (take note of) him (*skopein*). 3.) Avoid (*ekklinate*) the false teacher.

We must reject this summary as an attempt to manufacture a doctrinal difference where none exists. We reject point 1 of the summary of the WELS position since *skopein* does not mean “identify” or “mark” (in the contemporary sense of the word). It means “watch out for.” Point 2 of the CLC summary is wrong, because you do not first “take note of someone” whom you have already been admonishing. You admonish him because you have noticed that he is doing wrong. It appears that Roehl is here using “mark” in the sense of “identify” or “brand” in spite of the more correct words in the parentheses. We accept point 1 of the “CLC Position” as a statement of what our position is and has always been. The phrases “an impasse” and “no further avail” were not intended to mean anything different than what point 1 of the CLC Position says. WELS writings are filled with many synonymous statements. We have never insisted that “impasse” and “no avail” are the only terms or even the best or clearest terms. But we have refused to let the CLC force upon these terms an understanding which the writers never intended. When the misplaced references to *skopein* are eliminated from the two summaries, it can be seen that the two views are the same.

WELS Position: 2.) Admonish him till an impasse is reached (having been convinced that admonition will be of no further avail). 3.) Avoid (*ekklinate*) the false teacher.

CLC Position: 1.) Admonish an erring brother, both to determine if he is indeed a false teacher (as opposed to a weak brother) and to turn him from his error. If he fails to heed that admonition and thus identifies himself as a “causer of divisions and offenses,” 3.) Avoid (*ekklinate*) the false teacher.

Roehl, nevertheless, goes on to say, “The WELS position (officially adopted in 1959) calls for continued fellowship with those who have been marked or identified (*skopein*) as causers of divisions and offenses” and “the WELS position called for loving admonition after the causer of divi-

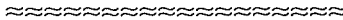
sions and offenses has been marked.” Both of these statements are wrong, since in Roehl’s summary of the WELS position both the meaning and chronological position which Roehl assigns to *skopein* do not accurately represent the WELS position. What Roehl is condemning is a manufactured caricature of the WELS position, not the real thing.

It is this relapse into the confusing misapplication of the archaic term “mark” which leads us to say that it seems as if the 1987-1990 meetings never occurred, since an agreement on the meaning of *skopein* was one of the primary accomplishments of those meetings.

If the CLC insists that the 1959 sentence must mean what they say it means and not what the parallel WELS statements and explanations say it was intended to mean, it appears that an impasse has been reached and further discussion is of no avail.

It is sad that the talks which began so promisingly failed to produce concrete steps toward removing the division between the WELS and CLC. It is doubly sad that CLC spokesmen are ignoring the Joint Statement and basing allegations of a doctrinal difference between the WELS and CLC on a caricature of the WELS position which WELS representatives could not accept as an accurate summary of their view. Readers who want to reach their own conclusion should read the WELS *Reports and Memorials*, 1993, p 232-241 and the CLC *Journal of Theology*, December 1994, p 31-34, June 2000, p 41-50.

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IS AMERICAN CATHOLICISM IN DECLINE?

A 1992 book, *The Churching of America*, by Prof. Rodney Stark of the University of Washington and Prof. Roger Finke of Purdue University suggested that “it is unlikely that the American Catholic Church will be able to halt its transformation from an energetic sect into a sedate mainline body.” The authors believed that the Roman Catholic Church’s “contribution to the churching of America is drawing to an end.” The authors predicted that the Roman Catholic Church will soon become like the nine major Protestant denominations in America whose membership declined significantly during the last few decades (these mainline denominations lost 22 percent of their membership between 1970 and 1997 or 5.8 million members).

Joseph Claude Harris in an article entitled, “Are American Catholics in Decline?” (*America*, June 3-20, 2000) argues that the predictions of the two professors have not come to pass and seem unlikely to happen. Harris writes, “Catholic full or confirmed membership grew from 37.1 million in 1970 to 47.4 million in 1997, an increase of 27.7 percent. . . . The number of Catholics increased at about the rate of total population growth