



WELS

and

CLC



How do they Differ?

Revised, September 2003

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) are both conservative Lutheran church bodies. Doctrinally, they have many more things in common than they have differences. However, the church to which we belong is supposed to be one with which we are in full agreement concerning all of the doctrines of Scripture. Since 1960, the members of the CLC have not been in fellowship with the WELS because of a difference concerning what the Bible teaches about church fellowship.

The Bible teaches that we are to worship, pray, do church work, and commune only with those who teach all of God's Word in its truth. If it should happen that false teaching arises within our fellowship, we are to identify it and separate ourselves from it.

(Acts 20:30-31) Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

(Romans 16:17-18) Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.

2055

God's command for us in this area is to flee from false teachers. In many churches, the standard of agreement for exercising fellowship has to do with only a few "basic" Christian doctrines. But the Bible's own standard for fellowship is agreement concerning all of the Bible's teachings.

(Matthew 28:19-20) Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

(1 Corinthians 1:10) Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

In past official statements, the Wisconsin Synod and its sister church body, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), have taken the position that there are times when the right thing to do is to stay in fellowship, at least for a time, with known false teachers. This is not in accordance with God's Word.

A Short History

From 1872 until about 1961 there were various conservative Lutheran synods that made up a larger federation, called the "Synodical Conference." Originally, this included the Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Synod, the Norwegian Synod, and the Slovak Synod. Organizationally, these synods remained separate from each other, but were in fellowship together, and thus were able to exchange pastors and teachers, and commune in one another's churches.

This fine arrangement for like-minded Lutherans was spoiled, however, because of unscriptural doctrine and practice that grew in the Missouri Synod, throughout the 1940's and 50's. Among other things, the Missouri Synod abandoned its Scriptural position concerning Lodges and Scouting, and at one point declared its agreement with the liberal American Lutheran Church. Over many years the Wisconsin Synod protested these changes from Scriptural doctrine and practice in the Missouri Synod, but things grew worse instead of better.

Finally, the Wisconsin Synod made this resolution concerning the Missouri Synod at its 1955 Convention: *"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 practices created divisions and offenses both in her own body and in the entire Synodical Conference. Such divisions and offenses are of long standing."* Thus already in 1955 the WELS had identified the Missouri Synod as a false-teaching church body. The right thing to do at this point would have been to withdraw from fellowship with Missouri, as well as from the Synodical Conference. This would have been in simple obedience to the instructions that God has given us in Romans 16:17 to *"note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them"* (Rom 16:17). Because of the failure of the WELS and ELS to follow the Lord's clear instructions to be separate from false teachers, a number of congregations and pastors left those two church bodies. They were brought together as the CLC in 1960.

Not Timing, but Principle

It was not until 1961 that the WELS and ELS separated from the false-teaching Missouri Synod. Since they did finally do so, shouldn't the pastors and members of the CLC have then gone

back to their former church bodies? WELS members today often assume that we are still a separate church body because we felt that Wisconsin should have separated sooner than it did. In point of fact, the issue of timing is not central at all. Instead, the central issue is a difference about the *reason why* a separation must take place according to Scripture. It is a matter of Scriptural principle.

The Scriptural reason for leaving a false-teaching church is simply the fact that there is false teaching there, and that separation is what the Lord commands. God commands this, not only for our own good but also as a clear witness to those who are still caught up in error. The correct Scriptural procedure for dealing with erring brethren and false teachers is taught in passages such as 1 Tim. 4:16, Galatians 6:1-2, Matthew 7:15, Romans 16:17-18, and 2 John 1:10-11. The principles can be summarized in this way:

1. **Admonish** someone with whom you are in fellowship if you think he may have fallen into an inadvertent error in doctrine or practice. The problem may be a simple misunderstanding. Or, you may be dealing with a person whose faith is weak; if he is willing to listen to God's Word and be corrected by it, then you have both been blessed.
2. **Take note of**, that is, watch out for and identify, any person or organization that is in fact teaching doctrine that is contrary to the Scriptures.
3. **Avoid** any such false teacher (or heterodox church). That means the Lord wants us to break off our fellowship ties without delay. We should no longer be a religious partner with them in any way.

The WELS and ELS did not follow these Scriptural principles in their dealings with Missouri. And, when they did finally break fellowship, it was not for a Scriptural reason. They left, not because of the fact of false teaching, but because they had become convinced, in their own human judgment, that Missouri was not going to return to doctrinal orthodoxy.

In past official statements and resolutions, the Wisconsin Synod (along with its sister synod, the ELS) showed that it had changed its doctrine to match its practice, by saying that the following can be a correct procedure for dealing with false teachers:

4. **Take note of**, that is, watch out for and identify, any person or organization that is in fact teaching doctrine that is contrary to the Scriptures.
1. **Admonish** such false teachers, while remaining in fellowship with them, in the hope that they will change their ways.
2. **Avoid** the false teachers, if it is your judgment that further admonition will not do any good.

In other words, it was considered acceptable to delay separating from false teachers, if you have the opinion that staying with them and admonishing them might still bring about a change. This, in itself, is a false doctrine. The WELS took this position in order to justify its earlier disobedience to Rom. 16:17-18 with regard to the Missouri Synod. This teaching can be clearly demonstrated from official synodical statements of the WELS and ELS, which have never been rejected or withdrawn, eg:

"Termination of church fellowship is called for when you have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail and that the erring brother or church body demands recognition for their error." (From the 1959 WELS Convention Proceedings.)

"The ELS position of long standing has been this, very briefly, that when a person or church body with whom we are in fellowship causes divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine we have learned, we mark them immediately, then admonish, and if this proves fruitless, then avoid them." (From the ELS's "Synod Lutheran Quarterly," June 1962, p. 21.)

Because these two church bodies have historical statements on the doctrine of church fellowship which are unscriptural, we cannot exercise fellowship with the WELS and ELS.

That was Then; This is Now

No doubt there are many in the Wisconsin Synod who would not agree with the "Take note of false teachers, then admonish them, then avoid-after-you-think-nothing-more-can-be-done" doctrine. It is a fair question to ask, then, *"Even if there was a doctrinal disagreement at that time, shouldn't our fellowship be based on what these two church bodies teach on the subject NOW?"* Do these two synods have a current difference in doctrine, or is this all just a matter of decades-old history?

The answer is that the false doctrine that the WELS fell into in the late 1950's still stands today as part of the synod's public confession. As recently as 1990 there have been meetings between representatives of the WELS, ELS, and CLC to try to iron out an agreement about separation from false-teaching church bodies. In the draft copy of a joint statement on the subject, the men from all three synods appeared to have reached a genuine breakthrough. They agreed in writing that it was wrong, after identifying false teachers, to base a decision to "avoid" them on a human judgment about whether or not further admonition might do any good. Though the "joint statement" was never officially adopted by any of the church bodies, it was a good start toward a process of reestablishing fellowship. However, when the CLC representatives wanted to refer to these newly-stated, Scriptural principles as a "settlement of doctrinal differences," the WELS/ELS men declined, claiming that there had never been a doctrinal difference in the first place. (It should be noted that during inter-synodical meetings in 1972, both the CLC and the WELS recognized the existence of a doctrinal difference between the two synods.)

What then became of the official statement by the WELS 1959 Convention that said *"Termination of church fellowship is called for when you have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail"*? In effect, the WELS/ELS representatives said two different and contradictory things about it. First they rightly rejected it in the "joint statement." But then, by saying that there has never been a doctrinal difference on this matter, they refused to reject the *"no further avail"* statement as being false doctrine. Thus, their position was that the statement IS and IS NOT false doctrine, at one and the same time. Such a position cannot be the basis for us to establish God-pleasing fellowship ties with the WELS. The bottom line is that the former official statements of false doctrine remain in effect, and are therefore a barrier that stands between the WELS and the CLC.

It should also be noted that current statements from the WELS on the subject of church fellowship are consistent with their unscriptural practice regarding separation from the LCMS during the late 1950's to early 1960's. For instance, the *"Theses on Church Fellowship,"* by the Commission on Inter-Church Relations of the WELS, 1997, states:

*"We can no longer recognize and treat as Christian brethren those who in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error in doctrine or practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it."*¹

Prof. David Lau of Immanuel Seminary, Eau Claire, correctly notes the extra-biblical elements found in this statement:

"Notice... the 'and' in the WELS statement. It is not enough for the errorist to adhere to an error in doctrine or practice. He must also demand recognition for it and make propaganda for it before fellowship should be terminated. All these additions make it necessary for the group doing the suspending to do more than look

¹ Point B5b. Cf: <http://www.wels.net/sab/listen/doc/doc-st-3.html#fellow>.

at the facts of what is being done and compare them with Scripture. No, the group must also determine whether the errorist is persistent, whether the admonition has been patient enough, and also whether the errorist is demanding recognition for the error (whatever that means) and making propaganda for it. Again, using this criterion will lead to debates as to whether propaganda is being made or not. The CLC confession sticks with the Scriptural criterion and the Scriptural criterion alone: Are the persons in question causing divisions and offenses contrary to Scriptural doctrine? ²

The “CLC confession” to which Prof. Lau refers is the CLC’s “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.” ³

It is up to the reader to determine which of these confessions reflects a biblical approach, and which could allow for a continuation of fellowship with an erring church body, on the basis of whether certain subjective criteria have been met or not.

In the intervening years between 1960 and today, other issues have come up which further reflect the doctrinal difference between our church bodies. Most noticeable is the acceptance by the WELS of unionism with the Missouri Synod and the ELCA (the largest and most liberal of American church bodies). This unionism takes place through fraternal membership in “Thrivent Financial for Lutherans,” formerly known as Aid Association for Lutherans (AAL) and Lutheran Brotherhood (LB). Please see the separate section at the end of this article for more on this.

² Prof. David T. Lau, “Evaluation of Recent (1990 and Following) Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) on Fellowship,” (a conference paper presented to the CLC Great Lakes Conference, Sept. 2003).

³ “Concerning Church Fellowship,” ¶46. Cf. <http://clclutheran.org/library/ccf.html>

Hair-splitting?

It can sometimes seem like the little CLC likes to be separate for its own sake. God help us if that's true! Rather, our real reason for being "sticklers" on all the doctrines of Scripture ought to be love for the Gospel. Any false teaching, no matter how small, is a threat -- not to our pride or our own supposed "purity" -- but a threat to the Gospel itself. Paul was talking about false doctrine when he said "*A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough*" (Gal 5:9). The results of false teaching about the doctrine of church fellowship are immediately dangerous, and eventually deadly. Look at what has happened to the huge "Lutheran" church body, the ELCA. Its leaders have now abandoned many of the basics of faith, such as the virgin birth and Christ's physical resurrection from the dead.⁴ This didn't happen all at once, but as a result of "little" errors being allowed to stand side-by-side with Scripture truth. The "little" bit of false teaching grows like gangrene, as Paul says in 2 Timothy, until the true Gospel itself is swept away.

What God says about fellowship in the Bible is hard to put into practice, but the Lord has given it to us out of love, for our good. The doctrine of fellowship has well been described as the church's "immune system." When it is functioning properly, invasions of false teaching are dealt with, truth is upheld, and the body is preserved in God's Word. If the fellowship principle fails, then "germs" of error are allowed to spread and do their damage, and can eventually cause death. We want to pass on to our children and succeeding generations *ALL* of the truths of God's Word. Therefore none of the divinely-revealed teachings of the Bible can be sacrificed for the sake of outward unity.

+ + +

⁴ For a complete discussion, with documentation, cf. "*What's Going on Among the Lutherans?: A Comparison of Beliefs*" by Patsy A. Leppien, J. Kincaid Smith -- available from the CLC Bookhouse.

Questions and Answers about Fraternal Lutheran Insurance

"Thrivent Financial for Lutherans," is the name given to the recent merger between two companies: "Aid Association for Lutherans" (AAL) and "Lutheran Brotherhood" (LB).

Q: What is Thrivent Financial for Lutherans?

A: Thrivent is a "fraternal benefit society." It sells insurance policies to its members on a non-profit basis. It does generate income, but instead of paying dividends to shareholders, Thrivent uses the money for social and religious causes among Lutheran churches and church bodies. Thrivent describes itself as "*a faith-based membership organization.*"⁵

Q: Who can belong to Thrivent?

A: Only someone who belongs to a Lutheran church, or is the spouse or child of a Lutheran, may belong. However, it does not matter which Lutheran church you belong to. This company has many members among the (more conservative) Wisconsin Synod, the (liberal) Missouri Synod, and the (ultra-liberal) Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Q: What kind of support does Thrivent provide?

A: Thrivent regularly donates large sums of money directly to Lutheran synods, as well as to their colleges, seminaries, and elementary schools. It often provides "matching funds" for local congregational fundraising efforts. In 1993, the WELS received \$1.9 million in grants and matching funds from AAL. The LCMS received \$7.1 million that year, and the ELCA received about \$7 million. This does not include funds from Lutheran Brotherhood, which is now part of Thrivent, along with AAL.

⁵ <http://www.thrivent.com/aboutus/missionvision.html>

Q: *What's wrong with supporting the programs of various Lutheran churches?*

A: There are, no doubt, many beneficial services that are made possible through the aid of fraternal insurance money. However, this money also funds some terrible things that we would never want to support ourselves. For instance, there is a strong pro-abortion and pro-homosexual agenda in the ELCA, which is aided by fraternal insurance money. Even worse than that is the false doctrine that infects these heterodox church bodies. For instance, in ELCA seminaries it is taught that the Bible is not verbally inspired, and that Jesus' virgin birth and His resurrection may well be myths. It should make us shudder to think of helping a professor to teach a future pastor that Jesus didn't truly rise from the dead!

Q: *But isn't membership in Thrivent just a business deal? How is this different from buying insurance with Allstate, for instance?*

A: It is not necessary -- nor is it possible -- to investigate how every company spends its profits before we buy something from them. But Thrivent is not just a company from which you buy a product. You cannot buy insurance from Thrivent unless you are a member of this faith-based organization. When you belong to this fraternal society, you are not simply a customer of a company; you ARE the company, by reason of your fraternal membership and voting rights. Therefore, you bear responsibility for how the company's profits are spent. That makes it much more than just a "business arrangement." One of the stated purposes of this organization is to "*Financially help Lutheran churches, schools and organizations.*"⁶ Support of this church work is an exercise of Christian fellowship. Thrivent calls itself your religious "brother" in many ways -- in fact, that's what the word "*fraternal*!" means. The Bible says that fellowship should be based on complete agreement in doctrine -- which we certainly do not share with liberal "Lutherans"!

⁶ <http://www.thrivent.com>

Q: *Are there Scripture passages to guide us on this subject?*

A: Yes. Consider Rom 16:17: *"Note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them."* Avoiding false teachers means that we refuse to be partners with them in religious matters. Simply buying a product from a company does not make you a religious partner with them. However, membership in Thrivent is different. Since it is a fraternal benefit society for Lutherans, your membership does makes you a religious partner with the WELS, LCMS, and ELCA.

2 John 1:10-11 says, *"If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds."* Surely we do not want our money and involvement to help along the "evil deeds" of promoting false doctrine and even immorality, as is happening in many "Lutheran" churches and schools.

Q: *What's the "bottom line"?*

A: The question can be summarized in this way: *"Is it pleasing to our Lord to be a member of a fraternal, faith-based society that, in addition to its other activities, supports and promotes false teachers?"* The answer from Scripture is "no," and that is why membership in Thrivent Financial for Lutherans is not compatible with our Christian life and witness.

By Pastor Bruce Naumann, of
Grace Lutheran Church
710 4th Ave SW
Sleepy Eye, MN 56085

A member congregation of the
Church of the Lutheran Confession

BruceNaumann@CICLutheran.com