Can There Be Unity?

An evaluation of the differences between the WELS and the CLC

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Since 1960, the WELS (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod) and the CLC (Church of the Lutheran Confessions) have been separated and thus unable to share in Christian fellowship. To the outside observer, there is no difference between the two synods. Yet, they remain divided.

What is it that keeps these two, very similar, synods separated? What was the cause of conflict in the first place? Is there any hope of re-unification? These are the questions that many, both inside and outside these two synods, have asked in regard to the differences between the CLC and WELS. It is these questions that the author of this paper will address.

From 1872 to 1961 a number of confessional Lutheran church bodies united together in, what was known as, the Synodical Conference. The purpose of this conference was to share resources, ministers and strategies to better improve their evangelism efforts and bring more people to know the saving truth of the Gospel.

However, the dream of a long standing relationship between these various synods began to wane in the 1940's and 1950's when the LCMS (Lutheran Church Missouri Synod) began open talks about fellowship with the ALC (American Lutheran Church), a church body that the Synodical Conference had withheld fellowship with because of multiple doctrinal differences. These talks were un-acceptable, and un-scriptural, in the eyes of many members of the Synodical Conference because they were leading the LCMS to a break of the Scriptural teaching on fellowship. As a result, during the 1955

WELS convention, delegates from the WELS discussed the errors that they saw taking root within the LCMS and moved to take action against these errors.

It was at this point that the CLC ~~truly~~ began to be formed. The WELS thought it was only right to admonish the LCMS and lovingly bring her to see her error and repent. Other members within the WELS believed that any further fellowship between the WELS and the LCMS, even if it was in an effort to bring an erring brother back to Scriptural truth, was a breaking of the Scriptural teaching on fellowship seen in Romans 16:17-18. These members of the WELS, un-satisfied with the official WELS position to remain in fellowship with the LCMS in the hope that the LCMS would repent and change their current fellowship practices, split from the synod and formed the CLC in 1960.

It wasn't until 1961 that the WELS and the ELS (Evangelic Lutheran Synod), whom the WELS are in fellowship with, broke ties with the LCMS. Some would think that after such a separation the WELS and CLC could rejoin their fellowship. However, that is not the case.

The CLC holds that the WELS fellowship principles are still non-Scriptural because of the way they dealt with the LCMS. As a result no re-unification happened after the WELS broke from fellowship with the LCMS. These are the reasons that the CLC still holds for why there cannot be unity between the two synods.

First, the CLC believes that when the WELS did not break fellowship with the LCMS, as soon their error was found, that this was not just a bad judgment call, but it was a change in the WELS official teaching on fellowship.

Those in the CLC point to Romans 16:17 as the major section of Scripture that supports their claims, "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions

and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them" (NIV).

Though the WELS firmly holds to this passage as evidence of the need to separate from those who do not uphold doctrinal agreement with Scripture, the CLC would say that this break of fellowship must be immediate. The CLC states that when the WELS did not break fellowship with the LCMS immediately, and instead remained in fellowship so that they could lovingly admonish the LCMS, they were not acting in accordance with this passage from Romans. In the eyes of the CLC, the WELS practice of fellowship changed to the point where there cannot be fellowship.

The second reason why the CLC refused fellowship with the WELS is because of the WELS affiliation with Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. Thrivent Financial for Lutherans is a faith-based, not-for-profit financial services organization, which provides financial support and other resources for the Lutheran community and other non-profit organizations.

The CLC sees the WELS involvement with Thrivent as being an un-doctrinal fellowship with other Lutherans and non Lutherans who do not have doctrinal agreement with Scripture. Their reasons for this is that Thrivent has been known to work with other organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity and the Salvation Army, which are religious organizations that do not hold to the same Scriptural teachings that the WELS and CLC do.

The CLC does not see anyway there can be doctrinal fellowship between them and the WELS as long as these two differences still exist. And, in the words of Pastor

Bruce Nauman, if these two differences were addressed "it would go a long way" toward regaining fellowship between these two synods.

However, things are seen a little differently from the WELS perspective. The WELS, for many years, has had trouble identifying any difference in doctrine between themselves and the CLC. During the 1987-1990 talks of re-unification, the two synods seemed to agree on all doctrine. The synods were even able to come to an agreement on the principle of fellowship and made out the Joint Statement, which was meant to show the doctrinal agreement of the WELS, ELS and CLC. However, the document was never signed and there continues to be no doctrinal fellowship.

In the eyes of the WELS, the main reason that the CLC see false doctrine in the WELS fellowship principle is based upon a sentence written by Carl Lawrenz in 1958. Though this phrase can be explained correctly, the WELS does admit that it is vague and prone to misunderstanding. It is for this reason that the WELS has chosen not to use Lawrenz's statement in any of their other publications. Yet, this phrase by Lawrenz is sighted frequently by the CLC as proof of the WELS false doctrine concerning fellowship.

The WELS also sees a problem with the CLC teaching on fellowship. Pastor Michael Wilke summarized the WELS position of fellowship as "mark, admonish, and avoid" and the CLC as "mark and avoid." This would mean that the WELS, when they see a church body within their fellowship as beginning to act contrary to Scripture, would first gently admonish them and lead them to the truth. Then, if that church body continued in their error, would break fellowship. The CLC position would mean that

when a church body in their fellowship was seen in error they would break fellowship and then admonish.

One passage that the WELS points to in defense of their position is Galatians 6:1 which states, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted" (NIV). In this passage, Paul is telling the Christians in Galatia to gently admonish their erring brothers so that they can lead them back to the truth. It is for this reason that the WELS strives so hard to bring an erring brother to repentance and a proper understanding of Scripture before all ties are broken and the opportunity to correct is lost.

It was the author of this paper's intent to point out the reasons that both the WELS and the CLC remains divided. It was not the author intent to profess one position to be correct or not. However, the question does still arise, "Can there be unity?"

It is the author's opinion that no, there cannot be unity at this time. Both the WELS and the CLC believe that they are teaching what Scripture has stated. The CLC truly believes that Romans 16 is clear when it says one ought to break fellowship immediately when error is found. The CLC also is strongly convinced that what the WELS teaches concerning fellowship is unionistic and unscriptural. The WELS, likewise, is convinced that there teaching to gently admonish before a break in fellowship occurs is the true teaching of Scripture. They do not believe that they have erred in anyway with their current dealings with other Lutherans and other Lutheran organizations.

As a result, if unity was to be established at this time, in the eyes of the author, it would cause at least one synod to go against what they believe Scripture is teaching and

would cause a grave sin against conscience. Does this mean that all attempts at establishing fellowship should be forgotten? By no means! Re-unification would be a wonderful and a joyous day. The day may come when unity is possible once again. However, the author of this paper does not believe that day is today.

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