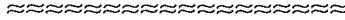


included not only as fellowship was declared, but also as it was enjoyed and celebrated in Christ's meal for us to eat and to drink in shared faith.

*Neal Schroeder*



## **OBSERVATIONS ON THE CLC**

Although there have been occasional reviews and reports, it has been many years since a general article has appeared in this publication concerning the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC). This past summer the CLC celebrated its 40th anniversary. Perhaps this is a good occasion to provide an update.

The CLC was founded in 1960 in large part by pastors and congregations who left the WELS and ELS. Most left because of the reluctance of these church bodies to break fellowship with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. After 1959, the organizers of the CLC also considered WELS to be holding to false doctrine in the matter of church fellowship.

In 1962 the CLC numbered 61 congregations, 62 pastors, and 8992 members. After 40 years the CLC is numerically very close to its original figures. The 1999 statistical report listed 71 congregations, 60 parish pastors, and 8631 members. These congregations are located in: Alaska (1), Arizona (1), California (2), Colorado (4), Florida (3), Georgia (1), Idaho (1), Illinois (1), Michigan (5), Minnesota (15), Missouri (1), Nebraska (1), New Mexico (1), New York (1), North Dakota (2), South Carolina (1), South Dakota (11), Texas (3), Virginia (1), Washington (5), Wisconsin (7), Wyoming (1), and Canada (2).

The international fellowship of the CLC has greatly expanded in recent years. At the 2000 convention it was announced that there are more souls in the CLC fellowship overseas than in America. The CLC is in fellowship with the Nigerian Church of the Lutheran Confession, which has a membership of 870 souls. The CLC has also come into fellowship with two churches in India with a combined membership of over 8,000 souls. Recently there has been one overseas missionary stationed in Nigeria who makes periodic visits to India. The 2000 convention approved a second missionary also to be stationed in Nigeria.

Many readers are aware that the CLC operates a boarding high school, college, and seminary at Eau Claire, WI, called Immanuel. The enrollment at the end of the 1999-2000 school year was 119 high school students, 39 college students, and 4 seminary students. Immanuel Lutheran College offers a two-year A.A. degree for students who are not entering full-time church work. A four-year baccalaureate program is available for students who desire to serve as Christian elementary

school teachers or as pastors. Some 75% of the current CLC pastors have been trained at Immanuel Lutheran College and Seminary.

The undersigned was an observer at the CLC convention held in Eau Claire on June 19-23, 2000, sent by our WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations. He was received very cordially by the officials and delegates of the CLC. He was impressed with what the CLC is trying to do with limited resources. In spite of the fact that many of the congregations of the CLC are very small, the CLC has 21 Christian elementary schools in addition to Immanuel Lutheran College. It has a growing home and foreign mission program.

The main topic of discussion at the 2000 convention was an aspect of church fellowship. The convention discussed the principles that should guide Christians in their relationships with secular organizations that have religious elements. In the background was the question of whether or not it is proper for a Lutheran Christian to belong to the American Legion. This study will continue in the next two years.

The doctrine of church fellowship, of course, has always been the point of debate between the CLC and WELS. The CLC has traditionally accused WELS of holding to a false doctrine on the matter of separating from an erring church body. A number of very recent CLC publications have repeated this charge.

What is remarkable to this observer in this regard is that the CLC commonly quotes as proof of the WELS false doctrine a sentence first written by Carl Lawrenz in 1958. The sentence reads: "*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.*" This statement appeared in "A Report to the Protest Committee," a document written by Lawrenz and approved by the WELS Committee on Matters of Church Union. The statement is quoted so often in CLC materials that one will soon have it memorized if one reads to any extent.

Two things can be said about this statement.

1) When the CLC says this statement is false doctrine, it seems to this observer that they put more into the statement than what was intended by C. Lawrenz or how it would be explained by any WELS pastor today. The CLC therefore gives the impression that they are setting up a straw man. They seem to put their own interpretation on a WELS sentence contrary to the way it would be explained in WELS.

It can be argued that this statement was intended to say nothing more than when error shows up in a church body, admonition will be given to them as weak brothers to try to correct them. If the admonition is rejected, the church body will be identified as persistent errorists and not weak brothers. Then fellowship should be broken immediately. In other words, coming to "the conviction that admonition is of no further

avail" is the same as recognizing that one's admonition has been rejected. When we in WELS concluded that we had reached an "impasse" with LCMS in 1961, this simply meant we recognized that our admonition had been clearly understood and rejected.

This seems to be the same principle that can be found in CLC documents. E. Reim's foundational essay of 1962, "Admonition and Romans 16," clearly speaks about the need to admonish weak brethren. He wrote, "When such efforts at brotherly admonition have been made and have nevertheless been rejected...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" (*Journal of Theology*, 2:5, Dec. 1962, p. 8). In the "Joint Statement" of 1990, representatives of the CLC, ELS, and WELS were able to agree on this proposition: "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 it and trying to persuade others of it" (*WELS Reports and Memorials*, 1993, p. 236).

The Lawrenz statement of 1958 does not assume the need for clairvoyance, that one should be able to foresee the future and somehow know that admonition will never do any good at any time in the future. The word "ever" or "never" is not included, and is not implied with the expression "of no further avail." The statement does not imply that one keeps admonishing as long as the other party is willing in any way to listen.

Also by this statement WELS in no way is implying that fellowship is to be continued after a church body has been identified as persistent errorists. It is significant that the document in which this statement was first written in 1958 made the case that the Missouri Synod was still to be looked upon as weak brothers. Certainly one can debate whether or not that was the best evaluation at the time. The founders of the CLC, of course, considered the LCMS to have been identified as a false teaching church prior to 1961. But, it is honest and fair to say that the document in which this statement originally was written argued that the LCMS were still weak brothers. Therefore in its original context the statement is not encouraging continued fellowship with a church body after the judgment of Romans 16:17 has been made.

The historical record from 1958-1964 supports this understanding of the Lawrenz statement. The statement was challenged at the 1959 WELS convention with a memorial entitled "A Call for Decision." Many of the signers of this memorial later became founders of the CLC. This

memorial proposed the following alternative wording: "Termination of church fellowship is called for when Scriptural correction has been offered and rejected and the erring brother or church body have continued in their error despite admonition. This is the persistence which distinguishes an errorist (Romans 16:17,18) from an erring brother (Galatians 2:11-14)" (*WELS Proceedings*, 1959, p. 210).

In discussions with signers of "A Call for Decision," C. Lawrenz and the WELS representatives insisted that what they intended with the contested statement was no different than "A Call for Decision." According to an early issue of *Journal of Theology*, the WELS representatives "affirmed that they desired to convey no doctrine other than that formulated in the 'Call for Decision.' They insisted that the thesis defended by the memorial, and the proposition set up in their document were identical in substance" (*JT*, 1:3, June 1961, p. 42). The WELS representatives said they would be willing to amend the contested statement if it was misleading. In addition, WELS representatives stated several years later that they were in agreement with the principles in Reim's 1962 essay on "Admonition and Romans 16" (*JT*, 4:2, April 1964, p. 30).

In recent years the proper WELS understanding of the Lawrenz statement has also been shown by the "Joint Statement" prepared in 1987-1990 by representatives of the CLC, ELS, and WELS. The WELS representatives were able to agree with this antithesis: "We reject the view that the decision to continue or discontinue admonition and proceed to avoid is to be made on the basis of a subjective judgment or conjecture about the possible outcome of the admonition" (*WELS Reports and Memorials*, 1993, p. 237). The WELS representatives did not look upon this antithesis as a contradiction of the statement of 1958. In WELS we do not read the 1958 statement as necessitating guesses about the future.

In short, the contested statement was intended to present nothing more than what presumably have always been the basic principles of both the WELS and the CLC. One admonishes the weak brother. When admonition is rejected, one breaks fellowship. The CLC seems to pour additional content into the sentence contrary to its original writer and its subsequent WELS interpreters when it brands this sentence as false doctrine.

2) It can also be pointed out that this Lawrenz statement has not been used in subsequent WELS literature. It is not used in our WELS "Theses on Church Fellowship" from 1959 (*Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1997, p. 25-37). It is not used in J. Brug's recent book on church fellowship. Undoubtedly WELS writers over the years have recognized that this statement is subject to varying interpretations and to misunderstanding. For this reason it has dropped out of use.

It therefore seems all the more odd that this statement is quoted in CLC sources almost as the quintessence of WELS theology. To under-

stand the WELS doctrine of church fellowship, one would do better to concentrate on the official WELS doctrinal statement and our recent doctrinal book on the topic.

All of this touches, of course, on the discussions between WELS and the CLC in 1987-1990. During these years representatives of the CLC, ELS, and WELS were able to agree on a "Joint Statement Regarding the Termination of Fellowship Between Church Bodies" (*WELS Reports and Memorials*, 1993, p. 233-237). The entire CICR was pleased with this statement and was planning to present the statement to the WELS convention. Then the CLC insisted on a preamble which implied that there had been a difference in doctrine between the CLC and WELS. This preamble was unacceptable to the CICR, and the discussions came to an end.

The CLC preamble was unacceptable because we in WELS have never been able to see that there has been a clear difference in the doctrinal principles themselves between the CLC and WELS. What we admit is that there was a difference concerning the application of the church fellowship doctrine in the 1950's. Different people applied the doctrinal principles differently at the time in keeping with their consciences, for which each person can be respected. This situation, of course, can happen in ethical matters. Two Christians may agree, for example, on the biblical principles about greed and materialism. Yet they may apply them somewhat differently in their own lives. Without a doubt, there also was confusion on all sides during the emotion-filled years of the breakup of the Synodical Conference.

The CLC, on the other hand, assumes that because the actions of people were different in the 1950's, there must have been different doctrinal principles. When asked what the doctrinal difference was, the Lawrenz statement of 1958 is quoted by the CLC as proof of false doctrine on the part of WELS.

In regard to this contested statement of 1958, again we would say it has shown itself to be an ambiguous statement open to varying interpretations. Therefore we don't use it any more. However, we would not be able to condemn it as false doctrine, because we can understand it in a proper way. And, the way it has been explained by its original author and its subsequent WELS interpreters has seemingly been in agreement with the principles of the CLC itself.

The undersigned is not alone, certainly, in wishing that some day by God's grace the logjam between the CLC and WELS may be removed. In so many respects, the CLC and WELS are "cut out of the same cloth." Progress toward reconciliation will not be made, however, if the CLC continues to insist that the Lawrenz statement of 1958 must be labeled as false doctrine.

*Tom Nass*

