

# The Deepening Wedge of Error

by Paul F. Nolting

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“Will you return to the Wisconsin Synod if the synod breaks with Missouri next August?” That question has been asked and no doubt will be asked again and again in many different places in the months that lie ahead. The question is based on the false assumption that the failure “to break with Missouri” is the only thing that separates the Church of the Lutheran Confession from the Wisconsin Synod. It is openly stated by some of our opponents that there is no doctrinal difference between us, but just a difference of “opinion” or “judgment.” It should also be noted that The Northwestern Lutheran quite regularly states the reason for men withdrawing from the Synod as being “the synod’s failure to break with Missouri.”

There was once a time, when we were still members of the Wisconsin Synod, when termination of fellowship with erroristic Missouri was the big issue. But that faded into the background even while we were yet in the synod. How did that happen? After the Saginaw Convention of 1955 the “synod” men began to feel constrained to justify Synod’s refusal to obey Romans 16:17. It became necessary for the leaders of Synod to make themselves and others who were troubled believe that disobedience was actually obedience. This effort to justify the action of Synod resulted in a pollution of the doctrine of fellowship, specifically in the area of the termination of fellowship. It was this introduction of error and the manifest continuation in that error that made it necessary for us to separate from Wisconsin. Since then, the wedge of error has been driven more deeply, for error is what Scripture calls it, a deadly leaven that spreads with devilish speed through the body of doctrine.

Let us examine this wedge of error and then observe how it has been and is being driven ever more deeply between us. The edge of the wedge was—

## I. The Doctrine of Fellowship

The Wisconsin Synod at its Watertown Convention in 1953 adopted this statement of its Committee on Church Union: “The issue that has opened this serious breach between our synod and the Missouri Synod and threatened the continuance of the Synodical Conference is unionism.” (Convention Report, page 103) We agree with this evaluation.

Regretfully we must add, however, that this same issue of unionism became the issue within the Wisconsin Synod. It came to a head when the Wisconsin Synod officially confirmed its position in regard to the doctrine of the termination of fellowship in 1959. What was this subtle change in doctrine?

We can see that most clearly if we think in terms of one of the clearest passages, Romans 16:17. As soon as this passage is mentioned, many of our opponents object: “But there are other passages! Is that the only passage you know? There are so many interpretations of that passage:” It should be noted by us, when such objections are raised, that men begin to hate any word of God that they do not want to obey. They want to shove aside any word that seems to hinder them in their privately chosen, unscriptural course of action. We, on our part, can well get along without this particular passage, for the Scripture does not speak of fellowship and the termination of fellowship only in this one place. Yea rather *separation for the glory of God and the self-preservation of the believer* is one of the great themes of the Bible. Destroy it and the believer is left the prey of error and the errorists. This is exactly what is happening in Protestantism today, also in the Lutheran church. Despite the jeers of our opponents we intend to use the Romans 16:17 passage because it is perhaps the best known and most widely used passage in connection with the doctrine of fellowship. It would seem as though our fathers could or would say nothing on this subject without quoting or referring to this passage. The present day objection to the use of Romans 16:17 reveals a widespread epidemic of “itching ears” that craves a new doctrine of fellowship that in some way can breath through the impasse of this passage. The Wisconsin Synod has now provided such a “new” doctrine for its people, who besides being afflicted with “itching ears” are suffering also from complications brought on by the “ecumenical virus.”

What is the scriptural doctrine of the termination of fellowship, as it was confessed in the Wisconsin Synod up to 1955? We need but refer to the resolution that the Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union submitted to the 1955 convention for study and subsequent consideration and action by that convention.

RESOLVED: That with deepest sorrow, *taking notice of the fact* that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, we, in obedience to God's injunction to avoid such, *declare the fellowship* which we have had with said synod to *be terminated*.

The emphases are mine. I have underlined the parts which so simply and clearly give expression to the scriptural doctrine of the termination of fellowship. If we print and underline the corresponding words of the passage, the scripturalness [sic] of the doctrine will be immediately evident to all.

Romans 16:17: Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.

Note that St. Paul requests us to do two things: mark or observe keenly, or take notice of something and then avoid or terminate fellowship. Notice that these two requests are faithfully followed in the 1955 resolution. The committee reports that they have and are "taking notice of the fact." That is the marking. Then they recommend the avoiding - "we ...declare the fellowship. ..to be terminated."

Notice also that the object of the marking is the same in both passage and resolution. St. Paul beseeches all Christians to mark "them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which we have learned." Now check the resolution. Notice that the words are quoted almost verbatim, except that "the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod" is named as the one who "is causing divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which we have learned."

Here we have true doctrine - a faithful reproduction of the thoughts, meaning, and even the words of a passage that applies to a given situation.

So scripturally sound the Standing Committee recommended, so faithfully the Floor Committee concurred in the "marking," and with one voice the convention unanimously confessed the "marking" to be sound on the basis of Scripture and history in the "preamble" of the Floor Committee Report. So close to the Promised Land of obedience the Lord led us, but then as in days of old the opinions and fears of man began to bob up, of course so piously stated. The convention failed to obey. By a majority of 94-47 it voted to postpone obedience.

Such disobedience had to be justified. In due time that justification came in the form of a new doctrine. It appeared in a "Report to the Protest Committee" and was adopted as the synod's position at the Saginaw Convention of 1959. It can be summarized in the following statement:

*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.*

Compare this with the Word of God and correct statement of doctrine in the resolution above. They contain three elements: the marking - of them causing divisions and offences - and the avoiding. The new doctrine also contains three elements: reaching the conviction - that admonition is of no further avail - termination. The last element remains the same: avoiding or terminating fellowship. The difference has arisen in answer to the question: How is an errorist to be identified as such and when is he to be avoided? The Romans passage, and the former Wisconsin Synod doctrine in agreement with it, says that we are to mark, observe carefully, take note of, be aware - of what? Those causing divisions and offences (death-traps for the faith) contrary to the doctrine. This is not a matter of being overtaken in a fault, but rather a matter of continuing in some error in doctrine or

practice. The matter is especially grievous when someone continues as a teacher of error. When we see such a situation, we are to know immediately and with certainty that we are seeing an errorist. Then simultaneously, without consulting flesh and blood, we are to follow the instructions of our Lord and avoid such a one. Recognizing a person or a larger group as being an errorist may or may not involve a longer or shorter period of admonition. Whatever the situation may be, the apostle instructs us to keep our eyes not on the course of the admonition, but on the people involved to see whether or not they are continuing as supporters and teachers of their error. For it is this continuing as a supporter and teacher of error, this continuing to cause divisions and offences contrary to the Word, that is the apostolic sign and signal for recognizing whether or not a person is or isn't an errorist who is to be avoided. In brief the apostolic instruction is: Use your eyesight and keep anyone who has fallen into error in focus. If he continues in his error, avoid him. When? Immediately, for the glory of God and the preservation of your faith is at stake!

Now take a look at the new doctrine. Instead of simply using your sense of sight the individual is instructed to use all his faculties in the complicated process of evaluating, judging and finally reaching a conclusion. What is he to reach a conclusion about? Not whether or not a person is continuing as a supporter or teacher of error: That is quite simple. Nor he is to determine whether or not the process of admonition is achieving its desired goal of turning the erring from his error back into the path of truth. To determine this in the case of an individual is in itself very difficult. Two people may disagree considerably as to whether or not an individual is responding positively to the treatment of admonition. But when this spiritual diagnosis is to be made of a large church body, this reaching a conclusion is most difficult. It is something that the common layman can't even begin to do, for he doesn't know all the facts and details. It's a matter for the experts, the theologians. Even for them it is most difficult, for experience has shown that they have not yet been able to reach agreement in regards to the diagnosis. Long and complicated is the history of the efforts of the Wisconsin Synod to reach a conviction as to whether or not their admonition has been and is of avail. The admonition itself started formally in 1939, with beginnings even before. For over twenty years it has been carried on in private and in public; by official letter and private letter; in the form of resolution, memorial and essay; in the forums of local conferences - pastoral and lay - mixed conference, intersynodical committees, district and synodical conventions, Synodical Conference conventions; with and without consultation of foreign theologians. There have been rays of hope, followed by hopes dashed; the frustration of committees, followed by the appointment of new committees; threats of action followed by further yielding; deadlines set and then set back; impasses declared and then bypassed; prophecies of action to come that never matured when the time came; an abhorrence of the situation followed by a learning to live with the situation; vocal rejections of error converted into quiet acceptance of error; positions once condemned, but now endorsed. All this, must be weighed pro and con. Some synod convention in the future is expected to arrive at a conclusive judgment in regards to these matters. Many today think it will be the 1961 convention. Some have thought that it should have been the 1953, the 1955, the 1957, the 1959 convention. We are now told that a majority, not a simple majority but a considerable majority, must arrive at the conclusion that this long and involved process of admonition is getting no place fast. Then Synod is expected to rouse its corporate body, shake itself spiritually, and declare fellowship terminated!

If the Synod ever gets that far, it will be making a long overdue right decision for the wrong reason. Synod would then still have to straighten out its doctrine of fellowship, for we are exhorted to avoid when we see someone causing divisions and offences in the church, not after we arrive at the conviction that the process of admonition has failed. Then is too late, as the Lord tells us and the history of the church confirms. From this introduction of error in the matter of the termination of fellowship the error has spread to the entire doctrine, so that now Wisconsin testifies one thing by word of mouth and quite the opposite by its practice and life. Wisconsin still officially says, even as does Missouri, that agreement in doctrine and practice is necessary for fellowship. But these tributes to the true doctrine are but expiring gasps of a former orthodox church body, for the same Wisconsin Synod is continuing in and defending its fellowship with heterodox Missouri. The situation has made hypocrites of many of the clergy; they deny in practice what they confess in the pulpit. Some, however, are becoming more boldly and frankly honest. Voices are now rising in high places in

Wisconsin that agreement in all doctrines and in practice is not necessary for fellowship. The errorists in Wisconsin, who have been hiding themselves under the disguise of a conservative dress as long as that was in style, are now beginning to assert themselves. It is with regret that we note that the wedge of error is deepening between us.

As the wedge of error was being driven between us, the split began to widen for another doctrine was soon affected, namely,

## II. The Doctrine of the Call

A high ranking official of the Wisconsin Synod said in a committee meeting at the Saginaw convention of 1959 concerning those who had signed the "Call for Decision" memorial: "If these men believe what they say, they will have to leave the synod." That process, which had begun already before the 1959 convention, was stepped up after that convention, and is continuing with the end not yet in sight. And so it came about that the question of the divine call of many pastors of the synod became a burning local issue.

Scriptures teaches and the Wisconsin Synod once taught correctly that the call of a minister of the Word is divine. That simply means, that God the Holy Ghost through the believing members of a congregation call a man into a certain area or section of the Lord's vineyard. This is so clearly taught in a passage like Acts 20:28, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, *over that which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers*, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." Since the Holy Ghost calls men to a congregation, he also may terminate that call. That he does in various ways: by calling the minister of the Word to his eternal reward, by sending sickness or old age that make it impossible for the minister to continue his duties, by calling the individual to another section of the vineyard. Congregations have no right to terminate a call unless they are acting as agents for the Spirit of God. When do such situations arise? If a pastor, professor, or teacher is guilty of persistent adherence to false doctrine, or a scandalous life, or willful neglect of duty, he has thereby disqualified himself as a shepherd of the sheep. When under such conditions a congregation terminates the call of a pastor, it is acting in the name and with, the power of the Spirit of God. This is scriptural doctrine, still publicly taught, but regretfully no longer practiced in the Wisconsin Synod.

What happened to destroy the doctrine of the call? To judge these things, keep in mind the chief qualification of a minister of the Word as given by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2: "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that a man be found *faithful*." Faithfulness is the Spirit-given chief characteristic of a pastor. Faithfulness to what? When a pastor is ordained or installed "he is required publicly to pledge faithfulness to the Holy Bible as the source and norm of all doctrine. He is furthermore required to pledge faithfulness to the doctrine as professed in the Lutheran Confessions. He is not required to pledge his allegiance to a synod or the doctrinal platform of a synod. On the contrary he is solemnly pledged to oppose the synod and the doctrinal platform of the synod if the synod begins to depart from the Word of God.

Now let's take a look at a series of events that have become more and more commonplace. One pastor after another has had his divine call terminated in one of two ways: either by direct vote on a motion to terminate said call or indirectly by rejecting the Scripture-based ministry of the pastor. In no case, to the knowledge of this writer, has any pastor been accused of false doctrine, a scandalous life, or willful neglect of duty. On the contrary the official representatives of the synod have been placating troubled pastors and congregations by assuring them that they agree perfectly with the men who have left and are leaving - "only they were a bit hasty!" Pastors, who as hirelings have occupied the pulpits of ousted faithful pastors and who still want to be conservative and who must soothe troubled parishioners, also tell their members that they agree with the doctrine of the men they have unscripturally replaced - "only they were a bit hasty!" So on the one hand the synod is trying to make its members believe that it agrees with the doctrine of the men who have been and are being ousted from their congregation. On the other hand it has assisted, encouraged, and almost applauded the ousting of faithful pastors. In all cases it has put the stamp of its approval on such ungodly action by

providing vacancy pastors and replacements. In no case, to the knowledge of this writer, has any congregation been called to repentance or disciplined because of its ungodly, unscriptural, and unchristian action.

What a fearful accumulation of guilt the synod with its responsible officials, hireling pastors, and rebellious congregations has heaped upon itself. Despite synod policy in this matter this word of God shall abide forever, "Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm." Psalm 105:15. The Synod and its "conservative" pastors stand condemned out of their own mouth. If they agree with the men they have ousted, they should have admonished the congregations to heed their faithful pastors. Did not the Lord say, "He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me." Luke 10:16.

How boldly, how carelessly the synod has sown to the flesh in this matter! Preserve the organization, even if you have to loose some men and violate another doctrine in the process. That has been the policy. And so in this matter also the synod has proceeded as though another word of God were dead. This is the word: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption." Gal. 6:7-8. Judgment is already falling upon the synod in the form of the loss of manpower. From ten to fifteen percent of the trained clergy of the synod, men of wide and long experience and with proven ability, have fled the embrace of a Word and truth-weary synod even as Lot once fled from immoral Sodom. Judgment always begins first at the house of God: first a famine of true preachers of the Word; next a famine of the hearing of the true Word. Amos 8:11-12.

The wedge is being driven between us. The split widens, for error acts as a leaven. It spreads through the body of doctrine. Another doctrine has been affected -

### **III. The Doctrine of Scriptures**

This doctrine is being attacked in two places: the clarity and the authority of Scripture.

For almost one hundred years the passage Romans 16:17 was included in the catechism, was memorized by confirmands, and was explained on the basis of the English or German translation by common parish pastors. But in recent years the passage has suddenly become most difficult and unclear. That has produced a paralysis of inaction. Men have made lists of the number of "interpretations" of this passage. The conclusions have been: Since there are so many "interpretations," and since so many "authorities" disagree on the passage, it is simply impossible for the common layman to know what the passage means and so it is also impossible for anyone to obey it. It should be noted that lists of various and conflicting "interpretations" could be made of many other passages. If these lists were studied, it could quite readily be observed that the "interpretations" that conflict with the simple text were made by men who simply didn't or don't want to believe, obey, submit to, or live according to the naked text of the Scripture. So the truth remains: The Word is and remains clear; all unclarity stems from the rebellious heart of man that will not yield to the truth. Those that cast the shadow of unclarity over a single passage of Scripture are actually guilty of causing a cloud of unclarity and uncertainty to pass over all of Scripture.

The second attack upon the Word has been a veiled attack upon its authority. Lip service is still loudly paid to the authority of the Word, especially around the time of the festival of Reformation. Yea the voices even seem to become louder the more the authority of the Word is set aside. How did this happen? Satan used a very pious question to destroy the authority of the Word in the Wisconsin Synod. That question is: "When is the time, the right time, to begin to obey?" With repeated low bowing towards the Word and with prayers asking the Holy Spirit for guidance in the Word, the synod has slowly but firmly replaced the Word with the authority of the majority in convention assembled. Thus man's word has replaced God's Word. The standard question now is: "What did the synod say?" Not - "What does the Word of God say?" The general president has several times quite unashamedly declared that the Standing Committee in Union Matters will not again venture to offer a resolution to the convention. That was tried in 1955 and the convention rejected the resolution. So the called leaders wait for the cue to come from the people, while the people look vainly for guidance from their fearful leaders. The result is that the responsibility for leadership and action travels in a circle: the leaders looking to

see what the people want and the people looking to see what the leaders expect of them. Satan, who knows how to use Scripture to his own purposes, has also suggested a passage that covers the present situation. It's 1 Corinthians 14:40, "Let all things be done decently and in order." Even sinning is to be done "decently and in order." For now continuing in fellowship with errorists, waiting to see what the majority of delegates at the next convention will decide in the matter, violating the calls of faithful pastors - all this is piously covered by the phrase, "decency and order." Those who no longer love the truth invariably fall victim to the lie. 1 Thessalonians 2:10-11.

Another doctrine has been affected by the wedge of error that is being driven between us. That is,

#### **IV. The Doctrine of the Church**

It has been said that the doctrine of the church is basic to the entire problem today. It is! So it is quite natural that error is also spreading to this area.

The scriptural concept of the church as the Communion of Saints, the Congregation of Believers, is being lost. In the minds of many church becomes identified with "synod." The sin of the age seems to be leaving the synod, while the corresponding virtue is declared to be loyalty and faithfulness to the synod. Thus the scriptural concept of "church" is being externalized and the road is being paved for participation in the ecumenical movement with its eventual return to Rome.

The call of ministers of the Word is also being externalized. It is being conditioned by membership in the synod. The false proposition has been permitted to stand that withdrawal from the synod includes resignation of the call. Thus the synod is undermining both the rite of ordination and the rite of installation - both of which bind the pastor to the Scriptures and the Confessions, not to the synod. While the synod permits these things to go on for the sake of organizational expediency, the congregations are gradually assuming the right to "hire or fire" - their pastors at will. In one case this contention appears to be upheld by a lower court of one state. And the synod, by its silence, condones this outrageous attack upon a scriptural doctrine that it still claims to believe and confess.

Nor has the layman in the pew escaped unharmed. The battle of the Reformation was fought to restore to the layman his glorious position in the church as a king and a priest, subject only to God in his Word. Laymen are now in huge masses selling their birthright of the Reformation for the "pottage of lentiles" of outward peace. They throw up their hands in convincing despair and almost tearfully exclaim: "How can we know what is right when the pastors can't even agree?" What a cry of desperation! What a feeble attempt to justify disobedience! Laymen in this area have had opportunities that few laymen elsewhere have had. They have had faithful leaders pointing the way of truth. They have been able to observe that no spokesman of synod has in any way or any degree refuted the scriptural testimony of their pastors. Yet they have rebelled against their God-given leaders, as once Korah rebelled against Moses. Numbers 16. How is this rebellion being justified? "We are faithfully following 'synod leadership,'" is the answer. It is passing strange that many laymen, who previously were unconcerned about and uninterested in the Wisconsin Synod, have suddenly become "faithful and loyal." Why? Because this time loyalty to the synod meant ousting a conservative pastor in the hopes of getting someone more liberal. The choice is towards the more liberal, and the congregations seem to be getting what they want. Thus so many laymen have thrown away their status as priests and kings and have made themselves slaves of the organization. Having thrown away the right and privilege to judge doctrine privately, the laymen have made themselves pawns of the clergy; on the other hand the clergy must spend sleepless nights fearing the laymen who can now "hire and fire" at will.

But what of us on our weary way? Let us realize that we are living in a truth-hating world. Let us shoulder the cross, taking a new grip upon it. Let us continue to bear it after our Lord!