

The ministry support the Military Services Committee provides is an important component of ministry to our WELS military members. I recommend that pastors make it a standard practice to refer their military service members to a military contact pastor and the WELS National Civilian Chaplain as the military member moves to their next duty station or deployment. It is important to use the service wels.net/refer to make the connection between WELS, the National Civilian Chaplain, and the service member.

The WELS National Chaplain can also assist with connections to programs and resources that pastors and congregations can leverage to support the mental health of veterans and their families, such as referrals to Christian Family Solutions or the Member Assistance Program. In addition to the WELS Military Services Committee, there are 122 WELS pastors who serve congregations near military installations in the continental United States and select nations overseas. These military contact pastors stand ready to serve our military personnel and their families as part-time WELS civilian chaplains.

As the WELS National Civilian Chaplain and liaison to the military, Pastor Paul Horn maintains contact with WELS military service members and their families. He also provides training and mentorship to new military contact pastors. The Military Services Committee provides our military contact pastors with online training and resources and regularly conducts training conferences for them.

As you can see, there are many ways to provide spiritual ministry, resources, and care to WELS military service members and their families. Pastors and congregations are the first line of support. The WELS Military Support Committee maintains contact with and provides spiritual resources to the men and women who are serving our country.

For additional information about the WELS Military Services Committee and the resources and support it provides, or to refer a service member, please visit wels.net/military.

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CLC DISCUSSIONS FROM 2015 TO 2019

At the WELS convention in 2023, the door quietly closed on the recent doctrinal discussions held with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC). Pre-convention materials noted that the talks were at an “impasse” because the CLC “introduced conditions for continued discus-

sion that the ELS and WELS committee members could not accept,”¹ and the convention accepted the situation with regret.² Now that the talks have ended, this article will give an accounting of what happened for the historical record.

To begin, mention should be made that these were the first doctrinal discussions with the CLC since 1990. At that time, a “Joint Statement Regarding the Termination of Fellowship Between Church Bodies” was drafted by a nine-man working committee, with three each from the CLC, ELS, and WELS. This Joint Statement was approved by the CLC Board of Doctrine, the ELS Doctrine Committee, and the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations (CICR), but it foundered when the CLC insisted that a preamble be added that was unacceptable to the ELS and WELS.³ Calling this to mind is useful, because the recent discussions in the end followed a path that was eerily similar.

The impetus for the recent discussions came from a grassroots group of CLC, ELS, and WELS pastors in the Mankato, MN, area who met together privately in 2014, found a high degree of agreement, and requested that the three synod presidents initiate formal doctrinal discussions. The original catalysts were Rev. Paul Nolting from Immanuel in Mankato (CLC) and Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary President Gaylin Schmeling (ELS).

Each synod picked three representatives—all of whom continued throughout the discussions. Representing the CLC were President Michael Eichstadt, Rev. Bruce Naumann, and Rev. Paul Nolting. Representing the ELS were President John Moldstad Jr., Prof. Gaylin Schmeling, and Prof. Erling Teigen. Representing WELS were President Mark Schroeder, Prof. John Brenner, and Prof. Thomas Nass.

All totaled, there were ten meetings, with the following locations:

- January 30, 2015: WELS Center for Mission and Ministry
- April 17, 2015: Immanuel Lutheran Seminary, Eau Claire, WI
- August 21, 2015: Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, Mankato, MN
- November 13, 2015: WELS Center for Mission and Ministry
- February 12, 2016: Immanuel Lutheran Seminary, Eau Claire, WI

¹*Book of Reports and Memorials*, May 2023, 21.

²See Report No. 02 of Floor Committee 3: “We are saddened by the cessation of formal doctrinal discussions with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC). . . . We pray the Lord would allow these discussions to resume at some point” (*Proceedings*, September 2023, 28–29). A similar report and reaction took place at the 2023 ELS convention.

³For a full accounting, see the *WELS Reports and Memorials for the Fifty-Second Biennial Convention*, 1993, 232–42. Also see John F. Brug, *Church Fellowship* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1996), 92–94.

- August 26, 2016: Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, Mankato, MN
- August 17, 2017: WELS Center for Mission and Ministry
- November 9, 2017: Immanuel Lutheran Seminary, Eau Claire, WI
- August 1, 2018: Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, Mankato, MN
- August 9, 2019: WELS Center for Mission and Ministry

It may be a surprise for readers to know that a considerable amount of time was spent discussing Thrivent Financial and the role of women in society. To a lesser extent, the theological concept of *in statu confessionis* was also discussed. All of these are topics that would need to be ironed out if church fellowship were to be reestablished between the CLC and WELS.

The writer of this article sensed that there was much common ground on these topics. For example, the group sketched out a “Study Document on Organizations,” laying out principles for evaluating organizations. After our meetings, however, two articles appeared in the CLC *Journal of Theology* that criticized WELS sharply for its positions on women in society and Thrivent.⁴ Obviously these topics remain significant barriers.

Still, the primary focus of the meetings was church fellowship, especially the termination of fellowship with church bodies. This has been the main bone of contention going back to the 1950s. Here the group picked up where the previous discussions ended by putting the Joint Statement from 1990 back on the table. Throughout the four meetings in 2015, the group tinkered with this Joint Statement, trying to make it more precise and clearer.

One benefit of the discussions was the elimination of caricatures. At one point a CLC representative sketched out what he understood to be the WELS doctrine. The WELS representatives were befuddled because they had never heard anyone in WELS actually present the doctrine that way.

Also, it needs to be said that the nine-man group operated with the understanding that we would never agree on the historical interpretation of what happened in the 1950s, but what was important was to see if we agreed on the teaching of Scripture today.⁵ This also was the understanding of the Mankato area pastors in 2014.

⁴Bruce J. Naumann, “Panorama: A Review of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod’s ‘Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles’ and Its ‘Restatement,’” *Journal of Theology* 58, no. 4 (Winter 2018, appearing in summer 2020): 24–38; and Bruce J. Naumann, “Thrivent Revisited: An Update on the Unionism Involved in This ‘Faith-Based’ Organization,” *Journal of Theology* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 23–33.

⁵For an examination of how the CLC and WELS each have their own historical interpretations of the 1950s—each of which holds together when viewed by itself—see Thomas P. Nass, “A Primer on the History behind the CLC: With Some Personal Obser-

By God's grace, agreement on the scriptural teaching became apparent. A preliminary draft of the revised Joint Statement was shared with the appropriate doctrinal committees of each synod—the CLC Board of Doctrine, the ELS Doctrine Committee, and the WELS CICR. After receiving input from them, the group completed its work on November 13, 2015, and all nine participants agreed to have their names attached to the revised Joint Statement. This is the document that was shared with each synod and is printed as an appendix to this article.

The revised Joint Statement found ready approval in WELS. After the CICR approved it, the Statement was published in full in the 2016 *Report to the Twelve Districts*.⁶ After being favorably received at the WELS district conventions in 2016, the full Statement was published a second time in the 2017 *Book of Reports and Memorials*.⁷ Then the 2017 WELS convention unanimously resolved “that WELS adopt the Joint Statement Regarding Termination of Fellowship as an accurate articulation of the biblical principles.”⁸

The revised Joint Statement enjoyed similar success in the ELS. In August 2016, ELS President John Moldstad reported that the Joint Statement was approved at the 2016 ELS convention with a unanimous voice vote and with no suggested changes.

As the Joint Statement was presented and discussed in the CLC, there were some robust acknowledgements of the scriptural soundness of the Joint Statement, and there were people who supported the Joint Statement all the way until the end of the synodical debate. In his Report of the President to the 2016 convention, CLC President Michael Eichstadt said about the Joint Statement, “I believe it represents real agreement on a doctrine that has been in dispute for many years. . . . I am encouraged that in spite of concerns regarding the introduction of the Joint Statement, the board [CLC Board of Doctrine] did not find any doctrinal problems with the body of the document.”⁹ Eichstadt continued to commend the Statement at subsequent conventions, as did CLC convention moderator Paul Nolting. The 2018 CLC convention noted that “the CLC Board of Doctrine and the 2017 CLC General Pastoral

vations,” presented at the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Forum on October 21, 2014, and found in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File. This essay says: “Do we have to agree on every aspect of the historical interpretation to be in fellowship? . . . Maybe it is enough if we each charitably recognize the validity of the other's historical interpretation, and we confess that there were unfortunate, imperfect statements and actions on all sides” (18).

⁶*Report to the Twelve Districts*, May 2016, 23–25.

⁷*Book of Reports and Memorials*, May 2017, 29–31.

⁸*2017 Proceedings: 64th Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, 34.

⁹*Church of the Lutheran Confession Proceedings of the Thirty-Second Convention*, 2016, 56.

Conference . . . have found nothing unscriptural in the *Joint Statement Regarding the Termination of Fellowship*,” and the convention resolved “that we acknowledge with joy that the *Joint Statement Regarding the Termination of Fellowship* is a scripturally sound presentation of doctrinal principles when dealing with the termination of fellowship.”¹⁰

After the CLC Board of Doctrine got involved in guiding the discussion, however, criticisms of the Joint Statement seemed to increase year by year, and it became increasingly clear that the Joint Statement would not be accepted by the synod as a whole as a resolution of the issue. With Rev. Daniel Fleischer as the chairman, the Board of Doctrine began to share the message that it would be necessary for WELS to admit that there had been a doctrinal difference and to publicly reject statements from the past, if the Joint Statement were to be considered acceptable. In essence, WELS would have to agree with the CLC historical interpretation that Prof. Carl Lawrenz taught false doctrine in the 1950s.¹¹

Criticisms of the Joint Statement’s handling of Rom 16:17–18 also arose, particularly after Rev. Vance Fossum was appointed to the Board of Doctrine in 2018. The CLC Board of Doctrine presentation at the CLC Pastoral Conference in June 2019 argued that the Joint Statement “does not present a Scriptural understanding of *skopein*” in Rom 16:17.¹² Though not a main point, the presentation preferred to translate *skopein* as “fixing your eyes on” or “marking,” rather than “watching out for.”¹³ Two years later in their report to the 2021 convention, the Board of Doctrine accused the Joint Statement of containing “statements that are misplaced and ambiguous, something clearly unacceptable in a confessional document. The primary example of ambiguity is found in Parts II and III, which deal with Romans 16:17.”¹⁴

As the CLC wrestled with the issue, the Joint Statement was a major item of business at four CLC conventions. Here is a quick overview of what happened at each convention:

- 2016: Directed pastors to study the Joint Statement under the guidance of the Board of Doctrine.

¹⁰*Church of the Lutheran Confession Proceedings of the Thirty-Third Convention*, 2018, 72.

¹¹For a WELS perspective on whether or not there has been a doctrinal difference, see John F. Brug, “The WELS and the CLC: Is There a Doctrinal Difference?” *WLQ* 98, no. 1 (Winter 2001), 62–67.

¹²“CLC Board of Doctrine Presentation, CLC Pastoral Conference, June 18–19, 2019,” six-page handout shared with ELS/WELS discussion participants for our August 9, 2019 meeting, 3, 6.

¹³CLC Prof. Clifford Kuehne approved of “watching out for” in his 1988 paper on Rom 16:17–18, which was influential for the writers of the original Joint Statement in 1990. See Kuehne, “A Study of Romans 16:17–18,” *Journal of Theology* 28, no. 1 (March 1988), 15.

¹⁴*34th Convention of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, Prospectus* (2021), 17.

- 2018: Recognized the Joint Statement as scripturally sound, but inadequate to resolve all the issues; directed the General Pastoral Conference to work on the topic more.
- 2021 (postponed from 2020): Declined to adopt the Joint Statement; directed CLC leaders to clarify what would be needed to settle the doctrinal difference.
- 2022: Directed three conditions to WELS and ELS for continued discussion.

Perhaps the most significant moments were at the 2018 convention. At this convention, a majority of the floor committee brought a resolution that the Joint Statement be adopted, even though this was not the recommendation of the Board of Doctrine and the 2017 General Pastoral Conference. After hours of debate, the resolution to adopt was defeated by a 69–92 vote. Then the convention resolved neither to adopt nor reject the Statement, but to mandate more study. A major disappointment to the ELS/WELS discussion participants was the fact that one of the CLC representatives (Rev. Bruce Naumann) reversed himself and spoke vigorously against the adoption of the Joint Statement at the 2018 convention and thereafter.

After the 2022 convention, WELS President Mark Schroeder and ELS President Glenn Obenberger¹⁵ received an email dated July 13, 2022, containing three conditions that the ELS and WELS would have to meet for the inter-synodical discussions to continue. The conditions were:

1. All three church bodies must clearly state their agreement on what Scripture teaches in Romans 16:17–18 concerning the termination of fellowship with false teachers.
2. It is necessary that the WELS and ELS reject past official, synodical statements on this subject which disagree with the doctrine of Scripture.
3. It is necessary that current official synodical statements that conflict with the doctrine of Scripture are removed or corrected, not merely annotated in online format.¹⁶

Anyone familiar with CLC discussions over the years would immediately recognize these conditions to be non-starters in WELS. On July 14, 2022, Presidents Schroeder and Obenberger jointly responded:

We believe that the CLC, in the resolution passed by its convention, has erected an insurmountable barrier to further talks.

This is truly a sad day, because we had sincerely hoped that the Joint Statement would be the first step towards reestablishing fellowship based on our synods' agreement in biblical doctrine.

¹⁵ELS President John Moldstad Jr. passed away unexpectedly on January 29, 2021, and he was succeeded by Obenberger, who had been the vice president.

¹⁶Email from Michael Eichstadt to Mark Schroeder and Glenn Obenberger dated July 13, 2022. The conditions can also be found in *35th Convention of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, Proceedings* (2022), 126.

We believe that the Joint Statement, crafted carefully and in good faith, showed that there really is no doctrinal difference on this specific question. And with the stipulations of the three points, along with a lack of specific examples of ambiguity in the Joint Statement and specific examples of doctrinal statements and synodical resolutions that would need to be changed, it seems that further talks cannot take place. It's not because we are unwilling to talk, but because we are unable to meet the conditions set before us.¹⁷

Though the CLC conditions do not explicitly mention what statements need to be rejected, everyone knows that one of them is something that Prof. Carl Lawrenz wrote in 1958: "Termination or 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."¹⁸ CLC members have long insisted that this statement can only be understood as blatant false doctrine—as if Lawrenz was saying that after someone has been conclusively identified as a false teacher, it is appropriate to remain in fellowship in order to continue to admonish him.

It is clear from other things Lawrenz wrote, however, that he was merely saying that it is through admonition and its rejection that a conclusive identification can be made. In 1958, Lawrenz was operating with the understanding that the Missouri Synod was still to be considered weak brothers. Since a conclusive identification in his opinion had not yet been made, it was appropriate for WELS to remain in fellowship and to continue its admonition until 1961 when the identification was recognized. Lawrenz from the beginning insisted that with his statement he meant nothing different from what Prof. Edmund Reim and other founders of the CLC were saying.

With this understanding, it is impossible for WELS to admit that Prof. Carl Lawrenz was presenting false doctrine. What WELS has been willing to say is that the Lawrenz statement is ambiguous, and consequently it has not been used subsequently in WELS doctrinal writing. Also, in a letter dated November 13, 2017, WELS President Schroeder and ELS President Moldstad offered to the CLC that some annotating could be done on a few statements from the past, if it

¹⁷Email from Mark Schroeder and Glenn Obenberger to Michael Eichstadt dated July 14, 2022.

¹⁸A footnote in the CLC *Prospectus* identified this as one statement that everyone should acknowledge "is unscriptural." See *35th Convention of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, Prospectus* (2022), 30. This statement appeared in "A Report to the Protest Committee," a document circulated by the WELS Committee on Matters of Church Union in 1958. The full "Report" is in Nass, *A Primer on the History of the CLC*, 19–25. For a WELS evaluation, see Thomas P. Nass, "Observations on the CLC," *WLQ* 98, no. 1 (Winter 2001), 58–61. This article is also available in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File.

would be helpful. The annotation could be something like the following: “For a more detailed explanation of the application of Romans 16:17–18 please refer to the ‘Joint Statement Regarding the Termination of Fellowship,’ which was adopted by the ELS in June of 2016 and by WELS in July of 2017.” You can see however, that the CLC convention rejected that offer. The contested statements need to be “removed or corrected,” and not “merely annotated.”

The first of the three CLC conditions is also frustrating—that everyone should agree on Rom 16:17–18. WELS assumes that we did that in the Joint Statement. A major portion of the Joint Statement is devoted to a very detailed explanation of these verses, and everyone seemingly agreed on the content of the Joint Statement initially.

The author of this article has repeatedly expressed his sincere admiration for the CLC as a confessional Lutheran church body that is “cut out of the same cloth” as WELS. The CLC is a numerically small church body (2021 statistics show 63 congregations with 6,758 souls), yet it accomplishes so much. It publishes a very respectable monthly church periodical, it operates a beautiful boarding high school, college, and seminary, and it supports a very aggressive world mission program (twelve different countries are listed in the 2022 *Prospectus* and a third full-time missionary was just commissioned).

Back in the early 1990s, Prof. Wilbert Gawriscch dreamed about the CLC becoming a third American Lutheran synod in the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference. Obviously, it will remain for a future generation to see if that can ever be accomplished. For the immediate future, the CLC and WELS will continue on their separate paths.

Those of us who participated in the discussions were disappointed in how things ended—a replay of 1990. Yet it was a pleasure to become acquainted with CLC people, and the study of God’s Word always is spiritually beneficial. We pray that God will bless the CLC, our estranged sister.

Thomas P. Nass

With input from John M. Brenner and Mark G. Schroeder



Appendix

The Joint Statement as approved on November 13, 2015,
and circulated in 2016Introduction to the
JOINT STATEMENT

Since the establishment of the CLC in 1960, there has been much discussion about the history behind the formation of the CLC and the precise nature of the differences that have separated the CLC from the ELS and WELS. God desires that we agree on the doctrinal principles of God's Word and commit ourselves to implementing those principles in our church life. Then we will react to circumstances in the future with a unified understanding of Bible doctrine.

To that end, the "Joint Statement," drafted in 1990 and revised in 2015 by representatives of the CLC, ELS, and WELS, is offered as a scripturally sound presentation on the matters of church fellowship that have separated us for many years. Agreement on this doctrine would be a necessary first step toward the restoration of God-pleasing fellowship relations.

It is understood that this "Joint Statement," if and when it is adopted by the three synods, will supersede all previous statements or interpretations of previous statements that are in conflict with it. All conflicting or possibly conflicting statements from any of the three synods are herewith rejected.

JOINT STATEMENT

Regarding the Termination of Fellowship

- I. On the basis of Holy Scripture and in a spirit of Christian unity and love we believe and affirm that it is God's gracious will and purpose:
 - A. That His church on earth be one flock under one Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus' sheep listen to His voice (Jn. 10:16, 27). They gladly hear His Word and follow Him because He is "the way and the truth and the life." No one comes to the Father except through Him (Jn. 14:6). The words that Jesus speaks are precious to His followers because they "are spirit and they are life" (Jn. 6:63). Jesus alone has the words of eternal life because He is the Holy One of God (Jn. 6:68, 69). His church lives by His Word and gladly shares it with others.
 - B. That all who believe in Jesus as their Savior and Lord agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among them and they may be perfectly united in mind and thought (1 Cor. 1:10). He urges them "to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). Dissensions and divisions arise when Jesus' disciples do not carefully listen to His voice as He speaks to them in the Holy Scriptures, God's inspired, inerrant, and authoritative Word. Jesus assures them that if they

remain in His Word and hold firmly to it, they are really His disciples. He promises, “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:31, 32). For this reason Scripture admonishes us to watch our life and doctrine closely and to persevere in them so as to save both ourselves and our hearers (1 Tm. 4:16), to keep as the pattern of sound teaching what we have heard from God’s spokesmen (2 Tm. 1:13), and to do our best to be workers who do not need to be ashamed and who correctly handle the word of truth (2 Tm. 2:15).

- C. That Christians as individuals and as church bodies be on constant guard against falsehood and error. False doctrines and unscriptural teachings are sown by Satan, “the father of lies.” “He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth” (Jn. 8:44). His aim is to separate Jesus’ sheep from their Good Shepherd and to take them with him to eternal destruction. With fatherly love God therefore warns us to beware of false prophets (Mt. 7:15), to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in our way by going contrary to the teaching we have learned and to “keep away from them” (Ro. 16:17). Out of loving concern He commands us not to “be yoked together with unbelievers,” but rather to “come out from them and be separate” (2 Cor. 6:14, 17). Earnestly He admonishes us not to assist or encourage those who do not continue in Christ’s teaching (2 Jn. 10, 11).
- D. That Christian brothers, motivated by Christian love and concern, exercise their fellowship by admonishing one another whenever it is called for, and particularly also when they notice that their brothers have strayed into error (Eze. 33:1–9; Ro. 15:1–14; Ga. 6:1–5; Eph. 4:1–6; Col. 3:12–17; 2 Tm. 4:2). Failure to admonish would be disobedience to God and evidence of an unloving heart. Those giving the admonition will not do this in a self-righteous, haughty spirit or in a loveless, mechanical way, but humbly and patiently, in the spirit of Christ, the Good Shepherd, who lovingly seeks every lost and straying sheep and strives to rescue it (Lk. 15:3–7). The response to such fraternal admonition given to an erring individual or group within the fellowship will help to determine whether the error is a matter of weakness or whether the erring individual or group is causing divisions and offenses by teaching contrary to God’s Word (Ro. 14:1; 16:17). If the erring individual or group is willing to be instructed from the Word of God while also refraining from promoting the error and at the same time making efforts to address it, the error will be treated as a matter of weakness. If, however, the erring individual or group rejects the admonition from Scripture and holds to the error, they are causing divisions and offenses, and our Lord instructs us to avoid them (Ro. 16:17).

[Note: Those who adhere to false teaching in spite of admonition are regularly referred to as “persistent errorists” in the ELS and WELS, while in the CLC they are referred to simply as “errorists.” This document uses the phrase “those who adhere to error” because it communicates the truth adequately and it has been used in the same manner in all three synods (see III, G, H).]

- II. With respect to Romans 16:17, 18, on the basis of Holy Scripture and in a spirit of Christian unity and love, we believe and affirm:
- A. The present active infinitive *skopein*, meaning “to keep on watching out for,” refers to Christians’ ongoing activity of being constantly alert and on the lookout for those who are causing divisions and offenses by teaching contrary to God’s Word (see III, A, B).
 - B. While the word *skopein* does not in itself specifically and directly enjoin admonition, this does not deny that admonition as enjoined in other passages of Scripture will normally take place concurrently with the watchfulness of which *skopein* speaks whenever error appears within the circle of fellowship.
 - C. The primary purpose of such admonition is in love to show the erring individual or group that they have left the truth of God’s Holy Word, and then also by the power of the Holy Spirit to bring them back, if possible, to the “pure, clear fountain of Israel” (Formula of Concord, S.D., Comprehensive Summary, 3; *Concordia Triglotta*, 851) (see III, C).
 - D. Admonition continues until the erring individual or group either repents of their error and turns away from it or until they show themselves to be guilty of causing divisions and offenses by continuing in their error (see III, D).
 - E. Christians will rejoice when those who have misspoken or inadvertently strayed into error accept admonition and correction from God’s Word (see III, I).
 - F. Scripture enjoins us to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 Jn. 4:1). This testing involves making a judgment based on the principles of Scripture as to whether we are dealing with weak brothers or those who adhere to error. (see III, E).
 - G. When “testing the spirits” in regard to a church body we need to consider not only its official statements and resolutions, but also its corporate actions or inactions. We cannot assume that every expression of individual members reflects the position of the church body, or that the correctness of its official statements and resolutions automatically guarantees that there is scriptural practice within the body.
 - H. The imperative *ekklinate* calls for a clean break of fellowship with those who adhere to error. When it has been ascertained that a person or a church body is causing divisions and offenses (*tous poiountas dichostasias kai ta skandala*) by teaching contrary to Holy Scripture, the directive to avoid is as binding as any word addressed to us by our Savior God in His holy Word (see II, D).
 - I. A break in fellowship with those who adhere to error is a forceful, loving, and ongoing admonition regarding the seriousness of their error.
 - J. The apostle’s urgent command *ekkliniate* (“avoid,” “keep away from”) is the voice of the Good Shepherd Himself as He lovingly protects His sheep and lambs from the deception of error. Such a termination of fellowship serves the spiritual welfare of Christ’s flock. Continuing in fellowship with those who are causing divisions and offenses exposes Jesus’ disciples to the

leaven of error, which is contrary to His saving intent (Mt. 16:5–12; Rom. 16:18).

III. With respect to Romans 16:17, 18, on the basis of Holy Scripture and in a spirit of Christian unity and love:

- A. 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 KJV translation “mark” can be misunderstood.) (see II, A).
- B. We reject the view that *skopein* does not refer to an ongoing, durative activity (see II, A).
- C. We reject the view that the primary purpose of admonition is to determine whether or not people are adhering to error (Gal. 6:1; see II, C).
- D. We reject the view that the decision to avoid is to be made on the basis of a subjective judgment or conjecture about the possible outcome of the admonition (see II, D).
- E. We reject the view that permits the use of subjective judgment to prolong fellowship with those who adhere to error, since such action is contrary to the principles of Scripture (see II, F).
- F. We reject using expressions such as “debt of love” as a basis for delaying a break in fellowship with those who adhere to error.
- G. We reject the understanding that, when a person or group has been identified as causing divisions and offenses through false teaching, persistence in the error is an *additional* criterion that must be met before breaking fellowship. We likewise reject the understanding that demanding recognition for error or making propaganda for error are *additional* criteria that must be met. Rather, these are ways that a person or group can be identified as causing divisions and offenses.
- H. We reject any use of the term “persistent errorist” that would imply that there are individuals or groups who adhere to error with whom we can continue in fellowship in the hope that they may someday return to the truth.
- I. We reject the view that the *ekklinatē* injunction is to be applied to those within the circle of fellowship who have misspoken or inadvertently erred, or to those who are weak brothers. Christian love will lead us rather to “correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” those who have erred in this way (2 Tim. 4:2; see II, E).
- J. We reject the view that a break in fellowship with those who adhere to error is *per se* the equivalent of excommunication. A termination of fellowship is a judgment on doctrine, not on personal faith.

Revised
Pewaukee, Wisconsin
November 13, 2015

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