

Introduction 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 *ekklinete* 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 *ekklinete* (“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 *ekklinete* 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.

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