

**The 1955 Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint
Synod of Wisconsin and Other States:
The Real Place and Time that the Break between the Missouri and
Wisconsin Synods Started**

Church History 331

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Introduction

The history of this convention needs to be explored before anyone can come to a conclusion about its affect on the relations between the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States (Wisconsin Synod) and the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS). The official split with the LCMS came in 1961 but prior to this the 1955 convention identified that there was reason for a break of fellowship between the Wisconsin Synod and LCMS. The reasons for this decision are essential and so I will explore the background of the relationship between the two synods and other synods that were involved. I will also provide some official documents and statements, as I have found out in various resources, to support the facts. So let us begin with the background.

Background: The Beginnings (1935-1939)

The historian needs to turn back the clock twenty years before the 1955 convention. In 1935 the Missouri Synod began its own negotiations with the American Lutheran Church (ALC) concerning prayer, pulpit and altar fellowship. At the thirty-eight convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church (Norwegian Synod), this observation was made, “For it is to the year 1935 that we must turn back as the time when the first noticeable rift appeared in our peaceful fraternal relations with the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. At that time the Missouri Synod first adopted an independent course by opening negotiations with the unionistic American Lutheran Church.”¹ This is where it all began.

Yet this was not how it always was for the Missouri Synod. They had adopted the *Brief Statement* in 1932 which was an excellent confession. Their confession of church fellowship principles follows:

¹ Paul Peters, ed., *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 52, number 2, pg. 215. Milwaukee, NPH: 1955.

28. On Church-Fellowship. -- Since God ordained that His Word only, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, 1 Pet. 4:11; John 8:31, 32; 1 Tim. 6:3, 4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, Matt. 7:15, to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church-bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16:17. We repudiate unionism, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9, 10, and involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Ti. 2:17-21.

29. The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name nor by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is actually taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications. On the other hand, a church does not forfeit its orthodox character through the casual intrusion of errors, provided these are combated and eventually removed by means of doctrinal discipline, Acts 20:30; 1 Tim. 1:3.²

The LCMS stood for the correct Scriptural teaching concerning fellowship in 1932 when they adopted this *Brief Statement*. This view, unfortunately, changed over the next few decades.

In 1938, the ALC produced the *Declaration of the Representatives of the American Lutheran Church (Declaration)*. The *Declaration* was a summary of the results of deliberations between the LCMS and ALC. Many doctrines were covered and here are some statements from the *Declaration*. On Scripture and Inspiration they write, "The Bible consists of a number of separate books...the separate books of the Bible constitute an organic whole without contradiction and error...and are rightly called the word of God."³ They define inspiration as "the unique operation of the Holy Spirit."⁴ Their view of justification is this: "He also purposes to justify those who have come to faith."⁵ The ALC then declares, "With reference to Sections III [Church] and VI, B [Antichrist], we expect no more than this, that the Hon. Synod of Missouri will declare that the points mentioned there are not disruptive of church-fellowship."⁶ The ALC

² "We Believe and Teach." *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 47, number 2, pg. 170.

³ *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 35, number 3, pg. 209.

⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 209.

⁵ *Ibid.* pg. 209.

⁶ *Ibid.* pg. 212.

was ready to enter into altar- and pulpit-fellowship with the Missouri Synod.

Later that same year the LCMS developed their “St. Louis Resolutions” which led them farther away from their original position in 1932 with the *Brief Statement*. The “Resolutions” agree with the *Declaration* of the ALC that some doctrines are not divisive of church-fellowship like: the Antichrist, the universal conversion of the Jews, and the physical resurrection of the martyrs before Judgment Day. All these differences in doctrine were not enough to convince the Missouri Synod that there were no grounds for fellowship between them and the ALC. The second resolution from St. Louis in 1938 was a big step forward for the LCMS. It is resolved:

2. That Synod declare that the *Brief Statement* of the Missouri Synod together with the ‘Declaration of the Representatives of the American Lutheran Church’ and the provisions of this entire report of Committee No. 16 now being read and with the Synod’s actions thereupon be regarded as the doctrinal basis for future church-fellowship between the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church.⁷

But in these same resolutions, the Missouri Synod realized that it needed the approval of those in the Synodical Conference. The LCMS and ALC had just moved one step closer to complete church-fellowship.

After the Missouri Synod had adopted its “St. Louis Resolutions,” the ALC had its convention in 1938 and came up with the “Sandusky Resolutions.” The ALC made some statements in these resolutions that need to be quoted in order to understand their position. The ALC resolved: “2. That we declare the Brief Statement of the Missouri Synod, together with the Declaration of our Commission, a sufficient doctrinal basis for church fellowship between the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church.”⁸

The “Sandusky Resolutions” also made some other controversial statements. They said

⁷ *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 35, number 4, pgs. 287-288.

⁸ *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 36, number 1, pg. 51.

“that it is neither necessary nor possible to agree in all non-fundamental doctrines.”⁹ In the “Sandusky Resolutions,” the ALC used another phrase that caused some concern. The ALC resolved “that the Brief Statement, viewed in the light of our Declaration, is not in contradiction to the Minneapolis Theses, which are the basis of our membership in the American Lutheran Conference. We are not willing to give up this membership.”¹⁰ The *Brief Statement* seems to have been given the back seat concerning doctrinal issues with the phrase “viewed in the light of.” The other declaration from the ALC was about their membership in the American Lutheran Conference (ALCf). They obviously were not willing to abandon that membership.

The ALC’s *Declaration* said the *Brief Statement* was to be viewed in light of the *Declaration*. These two documents were to serve as the basis of doctrinal unity between the two synods. But how could there be doctrinal unity with TWO doctrinal statements instead of only one? This is the question that plagued the Watertown Convention of the Wisconsin Synod in 1939. Pastor John Brenner, president of the Wisconsin Synod, had appointed a committee to study this matter and submit its findings at the 1939 convention. Point three of the “Watertown Resolutions” gives the committee’s opinion of the doctrinal unity between the ALC and Missouri Synod. It is worth repeating here:

III. On the basis of its observations, deliberations, and discussions the Committee is of the opinion that the doctrinal basis established by the Missouri Synod and by the American Lutheran Church, particularly in view of the proviso by the American Lutheran Church that the Missouri *Brief Statement* must be viewed in light of the American Lutheran Church *Declaration*, is not acceptable. Not two statements should be issued as a basis for agreement; a single joint statement, covering the contested doctrines thetically and antithetically and accepted by both parties to the controversy, is imperative; and, furthermore, such doctrinal statement must be made in clear and unequivocal terms which do not require laborious additional explanation.¹¹

⁹ Ibid. pg. 51.

¹⁰ Ibid. pg. 51.

¹¹ *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 36, number 4, pg. 294.

The resolutions that were adopted also declared that “further negotiations for establishing church fellowship would involve a denial of the truth and would cause confusion and disturbance in the Church and ought therefore to be suspended for the time being.”¹² In 1939 already the Wisconsin Synod knew that if Missouri established or continued pursuing the establishment of fellowship with the ALC, it would be a denial of Scriptural truths. In order to follow this endeavor between the LCMS and ALC, a committee was appointed to gather all the available information on it and keep the Wisconsin Synod informed on developments in the situation. Unfortunately the Missouri Synod did not break off negotiations with the ALC and now we enter the next decade to see what happens.

Background: The Union Effort Continues (1940-1950)

The “Watertown Resolutions” never really affected the Missouri Synod’s efforts at fellowship with the ALC. But sometime after 1938, the LCMS released their *Statement* which addresses the Missouri and ALC union and what “still stands in the way of actual church fellowship between our church bodies.”¹³ Their *Statement* was finally made available after the Detroit convention of the ALC so it can be dated 1939-1940. This document is a response to objections raised over the *ALC Declaration*, the “Sandusky Resolutions,” and other acts of the ALC. The *Statement* gets off to a good start. It states, “It would no be right or wise, we believe, that our churches should enter into a fellowship which the sister bodies on either side object to or are not willing to share.”¹⁴ The Missouri Synod Committee for Lutheran Union had received answers to their misgivings with the ALC on justification, non-fundamentals, and the *Brief Statement* viewed in light of the *Declaration*. Even after all this, the Missouri Synod continued its union enterprise with the ALC.

¹² Ibid. pg. 294.

¹³ *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 38, number 1, pg. 50.

A special committee began its work at the Detroit convention to carry on negotiations between the ALC and Missouri Synod. The final amended form of the special committee's report contains some very noteworthy views of the ALC. First of concerning the Scriptures they declare:

We concur with our commissioners and say: 'To be sure, everything that Scriptures teach is God's word and therefore binding.' However, for clarity's sake we add: Not every traditional explanation of a Scriptural statement is binding. The traditional explanation may not be the sense intended by the Holy Ghost and therefore may make further study under His guidance necessary; and, since human shortsightedness and sin may preclude the finding or the universal acceptance of the divinely intended sense, we thank God that it is not necessary for establishment of Church fellowship to agree in every explanation of a Scriptural statement.

Concerning the statement of viewing the *Brief Statement* in light of the *Declaration*, it is explained in this way:

1. In regard to the question concerning the essence of the Church, the Antichrist, the conversion of the Jews, the physical resurrection of the martyrs, and the reign of a thousand years mentioned in Rev. 20, we accept the Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod, only with the limitations set forth in our Declaration; 2. In regard to the other points mentioned in our Declaration we accept the corresponding points of doctrine in the Brief Statement as they are either supplemented in our Declaration or emphasized as to those points which seem essential to us...3. In regard to the Brief Statement in general this phrase intends to say that we are conscious of our agreement with the points of doctrine contained therein, without, however, on our part sharing the exegetical or other lines of argumentation in every case, and without feeling obligated in every case to employ the same terminology.¹⁵

From these statements made by the ALC, it sounds like they accept the *Brief Statement* only with reservations. They do not agree on the "traditional explanation" of Scripture. The ALC do agree with the *Brief Statement* but only with the limitations of the *Declaration*. In reality, someone could say that the ALC is picking and choosing what it likes in the Missouri document. Since the two documents don't really say the same thing on every point, the ALC would have to make the

¹⁴ Ibid. pg. 50.

Brief Statement secondary to their own *Declaration*.

In June 1941, the Missouri Synod met in convention in Ft. Wayne, IN and developed the “Ft. Wayne Resolutions.” On the basis of these resolutions, it seems the LCMS has once again taken a stand for the truth of God’s Word. They expressed their willingness to continue efforts to bring about true unity in the Lutheran Church. They were “determined to do so only on the basis of the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions.”¹⁶ One of the regrets they expressed was “that the American Lutheran Church as a body has not taken as firm an attitude in reference to establishing doctrinal unity as under the circumstances we had hoped for.”¹⁷ One of the “Watertown Resolutions” encouraged the Missouri Synod to produce a single document which both parties could accept and that it is written in clear terms in order to remove the need for explanation. The resolutions made this point clear. The convention told their committee “to make every possible effort that such one document be prepared...and that this one document be so clearly written that there can be no misunderstanding in reference to the meaning which the words are to convey.”¹⁸ Although they were neither accurate in every point nor willing to halt the efforts at unity, the “Ft. Wayne Resolutions” did bring the Missouri Synod back to a much stronger position on doctrinal issues than previous resolutions.

The Wisconsin Synod convention in 1941 objected to what Missouri was doing. The report of the Committee on Union Matters warns, “To continue negotiations under present conditions will, as we warned in Watertown, turn testifying into denying. It will create the impression of ‘dickering’ in confessional matters, will confirm the opponents in their ‘unfirm

¹⁵ Ibid. pg. 61.

¹⁶ Ibid. pg. 300.

¹⁷ Ibid. pgs. 300-301.

¹⁸ Ibid. pg. 302.

attitude,' and will continue to cause confusion and disturbance in the Church."¹⁹ Once again the danger of these union efforts was acknowledged by the committee: "Events like those mentioned seem to indicate that the unity of spirit is endangered within the Synodical Conference. Proper steps should be taken in time to check the danger."²⁰ The Wisconsin knew that there would come a time when the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods would no longer be in fellowship.

In October 1942, the ALC and the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA) began the necessary steps towards altar- and pulpit-fellowship. Both synods declared they were ready to proceed and wanted the fellowship consummated at the earliest possible time. This was another setback fellowship between the Missouri Synod and the ALC. The doctrine of inspiration was denied by the ULCA in previous resolutions and statements. So if the ALC was in fellowship with the ULCA, who denied inspiration and both were in the ALCf, true unity in doctrine could never be achieved.

Sometime between 1942 and 1944, the Missouri Synod Committee for Doctrinal Unity issued "A Statement" concerning the items that confront their desire for unity with the ALC. The first subject is inspiration. "The inspiration of the Holy Scriptures is apparently the most important issue today. While all Lutherans, as far as we know, are willing to say that the Scriptures are inspired, a number deny that this inspiration is plenary and implies full inerrancy of the Scriptures."²¹ How much must two church bodies agree on before there is unity in doctrine? This was one of the bigger problems invading the ALC, ULCA and ALCf. Against the view that only on fundamentals is there a need for agreement, the Missouri Committee declares, "We urge the sacredness of every teaching contained in the Scriptures and the duty of God's children to cling to everything He has taught them...The conservative Lutheran Church dare not

¹⁹ Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1941, pg. 76.

²⁰ Ibid. pg. 77.

write indifference in doctrine on its flag.”²² On the issue of unionism, they testify, “False teaching is a poison, and church fellowship with those who divide the Church through false doctrine must be avoided.”²³ The Missouri Synod still realized there was not unity of doctrine between them and the ALC. Yet even this position on fellowship did not keep them from pursuing unity with the ALC.

In 1944, the Missouri Synod and the ALC formulated *The Doctrinal Affirmation*. It was doomed from the start. This document was sent to all the synods for evaluation. But by October 1946, the ALC in convention rejected *The Affirmation* and began to despair over actually attaining Lutheran unity through doctrinal formulations. No more doctrinal statements were made...until 1950.

What else was going on at this time? In September 1945, a group of forty-four Missouri Synod pastors and professors sent out a letter along with a statement. This letter and statement caused repercussions in the LCMS and elsewhere. A few quotes from it will show why. Statement Two of this document confesses the “inerrancy, certainty, and all-sufficiency of Holy Writ.”²⁴ They even include antithetical statements deploring the substitution of “human judgments, synodical resolutions, or other sources of authority for the supreme authority of Scripture.”²⁵ In Statement Five they testify to the misuse of Romans 16:17 and 18 after adhering themselves to sound exegetical work as the basis for Lutheran theology. They proclaim, “We therefore deplore the fact that Romans 16:17, and 18 has been applied to all Christians who differ from us in certain points of doctrine. It is our conviction, based on sound exegetical and hermeneutical principles, that this text does not apply to the present situation in the Lutheran

²¹ *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 41, number 2, pg. 133.

²² *Ibid.* pg. 134.

²³ *Ibid.* pg. 134.

²⁴ *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 43, number 1, pg. 58.

Church of America.”²⁶ The assertions of these men did not improve the situation.

Statements Eight and Nine are worth looking at since they directly involve the current situation of prayer fellowship and unionism. Both are quoted for the reader’s benefit. First is

Statement Eight:

We affirm our conviction that any two or more Christians may pray together to the Triune God in the name of Jesus Christ if the purpose for which they meet and pray is right according to the Word of God. This obviously includes meetings of groups called for the purpose of discussing doctrinal differences.

We therefore deplore the tendency to decide the question of prayer fellowship on any other basis beyond the clear words of Scripture.

Statement Nine reads, “We believe the term ‘unionism’ should be applied only to acts in which a clear and unmistakable denial of Scriptural truth or approval of error is involved. We therefore deplore the tendency to apply this non-Biblical term to any and every contact between Christians of different denominations.”²⁷ Statement Eleven reiterates the truth of their conviction, “We affirm our conviction that in keeping with the historic Lutheran tradition and in harmony with the Synodical resolution adopted in 1938 regarding Church fellowship, such fellowship is possible without complete agreement in details of doctrine and practice which have never been considered divisive in the Lutheran Church.”²⁸

Interestingly enough, throughout all these statements, not one Bible passage is used to back up their convictions. They realize that Scripture is the only source yet the only time any Bible passage is mentioned is when they denounce making Romans 16:17 and 18 apply to all Christians who believe differently. This statement was withdrawn but not retracted in 1947. Those involved went through discussions with others in Missouri and the topics touched on were

²⁵ Ibid. pg. 58

²⁶ Ibid. pg. 59.

²⁷ Ibid. pg. 59, 60

²⁸ Ibid. pg. 60.

made the issues of special study for the Missouri Synod.

All this led to the ALC publishing “A Friendly Invitation.” It was released in March 1947 and reaffirmed their desire to establish fellowship with the Missouri Synod. The “Invitation” went back to 1938 and stuck with the resolutions formulated at the convention of the same year. This means the ALC was back to using the Brief Statement and the Declaration as “sufficient doctrinal basis for fellowship between the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church.”²⁹ The ALC also restated that it was neither necessary nor possible to agree on all points of non-fundamental doctrines. In point two of the “Invitation” they proclaim, “We earnestly reaffirm our conviction that no intervening discussions which we have had with the Committee on Doctrinal Unity of the Synod of Missouri have revealed any fundamental doctrinal difference in the understanding of the Lutheran Confessions that forbid entry into pulpit and altar fellowship with the Missouri Synod.”³⁰

In this same document, the ALC does give their reasons for abandoning the efforts to produce *The Doctrinal Affirmation*. These statements go to very heart of the fellowship problems. Being quoted here in full, they speak for themselves.

a. We hold that the slight divergencies in language and point of view between the Brief Statement and the Declaration all lie in areas where there exists an allowable and wholesome latitude of theological opinion on the basis of the teaching of the Word of God.

b. We further hold that to make the production of a unified statement of the sore contemplated in the Doctrinal Affirmation an absolute *sine qua non* of Christian fellowship constitutes a threat to evangelical liberty of conscience by demanding a degree of uniformity in the statement of the Christian truth that is incompatible with the Scriptures and with strict intellectual candor.³¹

The ALC still hoped to find and express the unity that existed between them and the LCMS.

In its 1947 convention, the Wisconsin Synod declares the same things as before. The

²⁹ *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 44, number 3, pg. 207.

³⁰ *Ibid.* pg. 207.

ALC shows important reservations about the *Brief Statement* in its *Declaration*. The Report of the Union Committee to the Joint Synod points out that “the Declaration does not truly settle the old controversies which are so extensively discussed in it.”³²

The attitude of the Missouri Synod convention seems to be very similar. At Missouri’s Centennial Convention in 1947, some important resolutions were made. The synod resolved, “That Synod declare that it is not ready at this time to enter into fellowship with the A.L.C.”³³ Unfortunately they were still willing to continue their doctrinal discussions with the ALC. The synod in convention also resolved that the 1938 resolutions would “no longer be considered as a basis for the purpose of establishing fellowship with the American Lutheran Church.”³⁴ The Missouri Synod also resolved to forge ahead and attempt to draw up a single document as the basis for church fellowship that was “Scriptural, clear, concise, and unequivocal.”³⁵ After their Centennial Convention, the LCMS did proceed to make a single document as the basis for church fellowship. This is the next topic.

Background: The Common Confession – Finally Union? (1950-1954)

In 1950, a committee from the Missouri Synod and one from the ALC reached an agreement on doctrine in the *Common Confession*. At their convention that year, the LCMS resolved to accept this as a doctrinally sound confession. It was also stipulated that more doctrinal statements may be needed in the future from the same source as the *Common Confession*. The Missouri did recognize what the constitution of the Synodical Conference denied each individual synod. A synod, by itself, could not declare fellowship with another synod unless all members of the Synodical Conference consented to the action. The Missouri

³¹ Ibid. pg. 207.

³² *Convention Proceedings of the Wisconsin Synod*, 1947, pg. 101.

³³ *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 44, number 4, pg. 283.

³⁴ Ibid. pg. 283.

Synod also conceded that there were many steps to be taken before church fellowship could be established with the ALC.

The American Lutheran Church also held its convention in 1950. The same topic of the *Common Confession* was discussed. At their convention, the Common Confession was unanimously adopted with the simple resolution:

We adopt the Common Confession as submitted by our Committee on Fellowship and the Committee on Doctrinal Unity of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod as a correct and concise statement of our faith in the doctrines therein confessed. We rejoice that agreement has been attained therein regarding doctrines that had been in controversy between our Church and the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.³⁶

In contrast to Missouri's resolutions on the possibility of clarification and more points, this is a simple and straightforward acceptance of the *Common Confession*. Following the resolution of the ALC to accept the Common Confession, Edmund Reim, president of the Theological Seminary at Thiensville, wrote, "The direct acceptance of the Common Confession by the American Lutheran Church seems to demonstrate a greater degree of confidence in these articles of agreement than was shown by Missouri. This in turn makes it more important than ever to give this document a most careful scrutiny."³⁷ And carefully scrutinized it was!

But before that is explained another move away from the old position of fellowship occurred. In 1951, the LCMS hammered out the *New Communion Agreement* with the National Lutheran Council (NLC). This dealt with military personnel who could not get to a service of their own Lutheran synod or church and wanted to receive communion. In the first point of the *Agreement*, the Missouri Synod is already denying the truth of Scripture. It says, "This agreement...is drawn in full recognition of the positions, rights, doctrinal expressions of each of

³⁵ Ibid. pg. 283.

³⁶ *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 48, number 1, pg. 59.

³⁷ Ibid. pg. 60.

the parties to the agreement.”³⁸ Point two states, “The parties agree to a cooperative conduct of service to Lutherans and others in the armed forces.” This is not all the LCMS conceded.

Points seven, eight and nine are monumental in this *New Communion Agreement*. Here is where the Missouri Synod really gets herself in trouble. The points are reprinted verbatim:

7. Just as in our civilian church life, there are exceptions to the usual procedure in the administration of the Lord’s Supper, thus exceptional cases arise in dealing with the men and women in the armed forces.

8. In exceptional situations, where a member of one group earnestly seeks admission to the Lord’s Supper conducted by a representative of the other group, the individual case in each instance will be considered by the pastor concerned. It is agreed that in such cases particular synodical membership of a Lutheran in the armed forces shall not be a required condition for admission to the Lord’s Supper.

9. It is agreed that the chaplain or pastor may commune such men and women in the armed forces as are conscious of the need of Repentance, and hold the Essence of Faith, including the doctrine of the Real Presence and of the Lord’s Supper as a Means of Grace, and profess acceptance thereof.³⁹

The comments of Professor Reim on this document are pertinent. He says:

In other words, while the pastor may deny communion to an applicant, e.g., for manifest impenitence, he may not bring up the question of the doctrinal issues which still separate Missouri from the Augustana Synod, the United Lutheran Church, and other. What was introduced as an ‘exception’ is now covered by a rule, a rule which even dares to speak with the mandatory “shall.”⁴⁰

Reim also addresses the wider issue of the affect of Missouri’s actions on the Synodical Conference: “The fact that this agreement was officially sanctioned by the Praesidium of Missouri, and this without even a semblance of consultation with its sister synods, justifies the question: Who is disrupting the Synodical Conference?”⁴¹

At the Synodical Conference Convention in 1952, the Wisconsin Synod “was requested to give a report on the action of the Synodical Conference with reference to the Common

³⁸ *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 48, number 2, pg. 142.

³⁹ *Ibid.* pg. 143.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* pg. 143.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* pg. 144.

Confession and the Wisconsin Synod's plea for its repeal."⁴² The Wisconsin Synod reacted to this situation by upholding their protest in the matter and not disavowing fellowship with the Missouri Synod. They did "declare that the Missouri Synod by retaining the Common Confession and using it for further steps toward union with the ALC is disrupting the Synodical Conference...Hence we find ourselves in a STATE OF CONFESSION (theologically expressed, IN STATU CONFESSIONIS)."⁴³ The Wisconsin Synod position was now clear and public.

At the next convention of the Wisconsin Synod in 1953, the Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union presented a supplementary report. In this report reasons were given why "the request for postponement of action on the Common Confession until Part II shall have received further study has the following serious implications."⁴⁴ The reasons are as follows:

- a) That the postponement requested is a long and, under the circumstances, a dangerous one: three years in the case of the Missouri Synod, four years until our own Synod can take up the matter anew in 1957, and five years until the next meeting of the Synodical Conference.
- b) That during this time the original Common Confession will remain in effect, and by official declaration is not under reconsideration, but is to stand as a valid settlement of the controversies treated therein:
- c) That the manner of the study that is requested would involve an inconsistency, since Part I is to be understood in the light of a second part which has not yet been adopted.
- d) Part II of the Common Confession does not meet our objections to those sections of the original document about which we expressed our greatest concern, namely the doctrines of Justification, Conversion, and Election, the very area in which the *sola gratia* (by grace alone) is at stake.
- e) That the untruthful situation which the adoption of the Common Confession (Part I) has created has thus been seriously aggravated, and will remain, even though the Common Confession should, because of a possible merging of the American Lutheran Church with other Lutheran bodies, never become a basis of official fellowship between the American Lutheran Church and the Missouri Synod.⁴⁵

These reasons are legitimate. The time factor itself would delay the Wisconsin Synod's decision

⁴² *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 49, number 4, pg. 292.

⁴³ *Ibid.* pg. 293.

⁴⁴ Wisconsin Synod Convention Proceedings, 1953, pg. 101.

on this matter until 1961.

The same committee report continued on this subject and came up with the following findings:

We hold that The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod

- 1) by its “deviating to an ever increasing extent from the position we have so long held and defended together,” and “from which we find ourselves unable to depart;” and
- 2) by its failure to heed our admonition in some of the matters (Scouting, Joint Prayer, Suspension of Negotiations); and
- 3) by declining early action on our objections to the Common Confession as a settlement of the controversies in the doctrines treated therein,

has disrupted the Synodical Conference and made it impossible for us to continue on our affiliation with the Missouri Synod and our joint labors in the service of the Lord.⁴⁶

The 1953 Wisconsin Synod Convention did not end there. Professor Winfred Schaller presented a Substitute Proposal in Matters of Church Union. His proposal included the actual breaking of fellowship with the Missouri Synod. His reasons were “that the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has left the scriptural position of the Synodical Conference in the matter of Scouting, of prayer-fellowship, of Chaplaincies, and the Common Confession. . . that all efforts to bring the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod back to the scripturally correct positions in these matters have failed and that we have exhausted all avenues of admonition-opportunity.”⁴⁷ This is the situation the Wisconsin Synod would have to deal with in the next biennium.

The Synodical Conference met for its 1954 Convention and the resolutions were presented. But these resolutions did not settle the issues disrupting the Synodical Conference. There were resolutions to continue to discuss the issues in joint meeting of the Seminary faculties, mixed pastoral conferences, other small groups and the sessions of the conventions of

⁴⁵ Ibid. pg. 101.

⁴⁶ Ibid. pg. 101.

⁴⁷ Ibid. pg. 105.

the Synodical Conference.⁴⁸ Professor Reim comments on this convention, “It had been stated officially and repeatedly that any and all decisions in these matters must be left to the several constituent synods at their next conventions...It must be understood that the real decision is to come, at the conventions of 1955.”⁴⁹ And so Reim’s statement was true. The real decision would be at the 1955 Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States.

The 1955 Wisconsin Synod Convention

All the previous material is essential to understanding the atmosphere of this convention. The Wisconsin Synod did not make the resolutions at this time based on a few years of evidence. Instead they formulated their decision from two decades of the Missouri Synod’s move away from their previous stand on certain doctrines and their disruption of the Synodical Conference unity. No matter how lengthy the previous section is, it is crucial to the delegates of the 1955 Convention. So we begin our look at this very important convention.

In 1955, Pastor Oscar Naumann began his term as president of the Wisconsin Synod. Even though he just started, Naumann most definitely had an evangelical spirit. He started right away to deal with the problems dividing the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods. In his report at the convention, this spirit shines through. Naumann presented the position of the Wisconsin Synod on church fellowship in reply to a letter from Dr. O. A. Benson, president of the Augustana Lutheran Church. The following essential paragraphs were quoted in Naumann’s report.

Our Wisconsin Synod is heartily interested also in an outward union (not necessarily organizational) of all Lutheran Churches, if such union is based on a unity of confession both in doctrine and practice, so that “with one mind and one mouth” God may be glorified by us.

Our Synod accepts without reservation the Confessions of the Lutheran Church contained in the Book of Concord of 1580, because they are an exposition

⁴⁸ *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 52, pg. 63.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* pg. 64.

of the truths presented in the Scriptures.

In particular, for the purpose of entering into church fellowship with any body of Lutherans

- 1) Our Synod insists on a wholehearted agreement in all doctrines of Scripture, regardless of whether they be fundamental or not.
- 2) Our Synod insists furthermore that the doctrine of Scripture be confessed clearly and unequivocally. While we do not deem uniformity of expression as essential we must demand a wording which sets forth every doctrine in such a way that the opposing error is definitely excluded.
- 3) Our Synod also insists that the practice of a church with which we are to fellowship be in conformity with the public confession of that body.⁵⁰

Pastor Naumann then continued by telling the delegates that the most difficult question confronting this convention was “the question of our further relationship to the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.”⁵¹ But what was the purpose of all the previous dealings with the LCMS?

Naumann explains:

Our dealings with sister synod...have had and still have but one purpose: to contend for and preserve unadulterated ‘the faith that was once delivered unto the saints.’ The Lord our God through his Apostle Jude exhorts us that we should earnestly contend for the faith. That, of course, means that we should not only hear the Word of God, but also keep it, guard it, and oppose everything that would surrender, becloud, or compromise any portion of the Bible doctrine.⁵²

Naumann’s presentation was not based on his own opinion but it was grounded in the Word of God. His report resumes with several observations. He first observes that the differences in practice have increased making admonition and discipline extremely difficult. Then Naumann states, “I believe it can truthfully be said that we have been growing apart instead of being drawn closer together. It is fair observation, I think, that at times synodical lines and synodical patriotism have beclouded the issues and have obscured the fact that we were brethren in the faith, and that we not only are but must be our brother’s keeper.”⁵³

Pastor Naumann’s statements demonstrate his evangelical spirit. He did not denounce the

⁵⁰ Wisconsin Synod Conventions Proceedings, 1955, pg. 12.

⁵¹ Ibid. pg. 12.

⁵² Ibid. pg. 12,13

LCMS nor call them unbelievers. Naumann said it like it was. God's Word needs to be supreme in all our doctrines. And yes, sometimes a person's connection to his particular synod got in the way of the facts at hand. In the next paragraph, he even denies the allegation that all that the Wisconsin Synod was doing stemmed from jealousy, hurt feelings or other weaknesses and vices. Since Naumann provided the facts as they were, he also reviewed some of the statements and claims throughout the controversy. The following quote presented the full issue at hand during this convention.

We are convinced that our position no only in doctrine but especially in the application of doctrine in our lives and in the lives of our members, is the position that the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference had occupied ever since its organization. The differences that have arisen between us, which we have been trying to face honestly and soberly, and to remove in an evangelical manner by the application of God's Holy Word brother to brother, have not been removed. They have increased.⁵⁴

This part of the Pastor Naumann's report shows that the differences between the two Synods were trying to be faced honestly, removed evangelically and addressed with God's Word as the basis of application. This proved futile up to this point as indicated by the Missouri Synod's constant defense and approval of its actions. Thus the differences had increased.

The report continued with some of the defenses given and how the LCMS never resolved any of the issues the Wisconsin Synod wanted resolved. Naumann continued:

Things we consider contrary to God's Word have been defended with the statement, "That passage does not apply in this case." We have heard so often the expression "Synod's interests are sufficiently safeguarded." Matters which we named in our resolutions of 1953, which we considered dangerous to our souls' welfare, deterrent to our Gospel ministry, and detrimental to our fellowship in the Conference, have been and still are vigorously defended. The charges which we brought in an effort to do our brotherly duty before God, have been definitely denied.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid. pg. 13.

⁵⁴ Ibid. pg. 13.

⁵⁵ Ibid. pg. 13

In this section, Naumann emphasized all the things that are important to Lutherans. It did not matter what synod you were part of, what heritage or social class. The soul's welfare was at stake. Earlier, the Missouri Synod had called false doctrine a poison. All these doctrinal deviations would harm the Gospel ministry, the very work God entrusted to the church. And, as stated earlier, the cherished fellowship in the Synodical Conference was at stake. There was no unity. Brotherly admonitions had been made but to no avail. The Missouri Synod still defended everything they had done and were doing. After all this, what could be done?

For some there really was only one avenue left. Naumann announced the only solution left for the Wisconsin Synod according to God's Word:

For those of us who have been closest to these problems, it appears quite definite that we must now obey the Lord's Word in Romans 16:17. Deeply grieved over the development of the past years, with hearts heavy at the sight of a crumbling fellowship, and at the same time aware of the presence in our sister synod of many who share our position, we express our innermost convictions in our preliminary report of the Standing Committee on Matters of Church Union.⁵⁶

This decision was not an easy one for the Wisconsin Synod. A wonderful fellowship with the Missouri Synod for almost ninety years was crumbling. In the early years, the Missouri Synod had brought Wisconsin out of its own unionistic practices but now they were falling into the same traps they helped Wisconsin avoid. This statement from Naumann is true and the only person I can think of is Edmund Reim. But that is a topic for later.

The issues had been revealed and discussed. The convictions, based on evidence, had been given to the convention. Yet this was not the end of the matter. Pastor Naumann's report did not say the Wisconsin Synod HAD to break with the Missouri Synod at this point. The last two paragraphs are phenomenal. Once again, these words illustrate the trust in God and spirit of brotherly love of the Wisconsin Synod's newly elected president. Naumann finishes:

⁵⁶ Ibid. pg. 13.

We implore the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us as we try to decide in the face of all the reports whether the Lord would now have us apply His definite command “Avoid them!” or whether we still have an unpaid debt of love to those whose fellowship we cherished so many years.

We are intent upon obeying the Word of God. We want to continue in it, in order that by it we may know the truth, and that by that truth we may be made free. For neither the fellowship of believers nor membership in a church federation can make us true and free disciples of Jesus, but only a faithful continuing in His Word. May our great and loving God lead and guide us to the right conclusion in this matter, also.⁵⁷

In its supplementary report, the Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union repeated all the objectionable practices that the Missouri Synod had begun. There was no indication that Missouri had changed its stance on the *Common Confession* as a settlement of past differences with the ALC. They showed no willingness to change this position. So the divisions and offenses caused by this position would not be removed. The committee also reported that “there still is no indication that the division and offenses caused by the Mo. Synod’s resolutions in regard to joint prayer and by instances of unionistic practice will be removed.”⁵⁸ The issue Scouting and Chaplaincy were individually weighed against the other issues before the convention. The Committee never even discussed the Chaplaincy problem.

The Missouri Synod said that the Wisconsin Synod did not understand the pertinent Bible passages on these topics. But the Wisconsin men had “repeatedly and prayerfully considered”⁵⁹ all of the passages. The Committee reported:

On the basis of our study of these passages we have over the past years again and again brought our admonition and testimony to the attention of the Mo. Synod. We deplore the fact that our testimony has not been heeded by the Mo. Synod. On the contrary we find our testimony is being openly repudiated by Mo. Synod representatives, and we are now accused of misapplying Scriptures and of bringing false charges against the Mo. Synod...Dr. John W. Behnken, President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod [said] that there is no basis for any of the charges of the Wisconsin Synod: “We do not admit the charges. On the

⁵⁷ Ibid. pg. 14.

⁵⁸ Ibid. pg. 81.

⁵⁹ Ibid. pg. 81.

contrary, we emphatically deny them.”⁶⁰

Later in the report, the Committee included an historical list of all the things the Missouri Synod had done which led to the resolutions of the 1955 convention. The majority of those points have been covered in the background section of this paper.

In its preamble, the Report of Floor Committee No. 2 did make the point that “a specific charge of false doctrine is not a Biblical prerequisite for separation from a church body.” They explain, “A church body which creates divisions and offenses by its official resolutions, policies, and practices not in accord with Scripture also becomes subject to the indictment of Romans 16:17-18. The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has...created divisions and offenses...Such divisions and offenses are of long standing.”⁶¹ The Committee lists the proceedings for conventions from 1939 until 1953 as proof of the long standing divisions and offenses.

The Committee report included more references to the Missouri Synod leaders defending and even justifying their resolutions and actions in the preamble. Thus the Committee proposed the following action on this issue:

Out of love for the truth of Scripture we feel constrained to present the following resolution to this convention for final action in a recessed session in 1956:
RESOLVED, that whereas the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has created divisions and offenses by its official resolutions, policies, and practices not in accord with Scripture, we, in obedience to the command of our Lord in Romans 16:17-18, terminate our fellowship with the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.

We recommend this course of action for the following reasons:

1. This resolution has far reaching spiritual consequences.
2. This continues to heed the Scriptural exhortations to patience and forbearance in love by giving the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod opportunity to express itself in its 1956 convention.

There was not a single voice that opposed the resolution to break fellowship with the Missouri Synod.

⁶⁰ Ibid. pg. 81.

⁶¹ Ibid. pg. 85.

On the other hand, there were forty-four voting and advisory delegates who vehemently contested the “portion of the resolution which calls for a final vote on the termination of fellowship in a recessed session of the convention in 1956.”⁶² Among the forty-four protesters, seven of them were members of the Committee that drew up the proposal. These seven men were of “the conviction that the reasons stated for delay do not warrant postponement of action upon the resolution.”⁶³ These seven men registered their dissenting vote. The most notable of the seven probably would be Pastor Armin Schuetze, who would be a professor at the Wisconsin Seminary three years later. Some others were Pastors John Brenner, Otto J. Eckert, O.J. Siegler, Karl A. Gurgel and Professors Edmund Reim and Arthur P. Voss, both from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.⁶⁴ Even among the Wisconsin men there was division. This was the first resolution made at any convention to break fellowship with the Missouri Synod. But this was not the most shocking event at this convention.

Edmund Reim, professor and president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, wrote a letter to the convention stating, “I can continue in fellowship with my Synod only under clear and public protest.”⁶⁵ This was a man who had reviewed the majority of the documents coming out of the Missouri Synod since the beginning of the controversy. He had seen first hand that there was “full reason for a separation now” with the LCMS. Under these circumstances, he resigned as secretary of the Committee in Matters of Church Union. Reim also realized this protest may cause some to be suspicious of him in his position as professor and president of the Seminary. His stand and teaching could not be changed “in order to conform to the synodical policy that

⁶² Ibid. pg. 87.

⁶³ Ibid. pg. 87.

⁶⁴ Ibid. pg. 87.

⁶⁵ Ibid. pg. 87.

has been laid down for the coming year.”⁶⁶ The last sentence of his letter reads, “Assuring you that this action is taken in the fear of God, and only after much thought and prayer, even prior to our convention.”⁶⁷ This man had definitely thought and prayed and done all this with a clear conscience. In response to this letter, the convention did not tar and feather Reim. Instead they unanimously showed their confidence in him as secretary and they also instructed the Board of Control of the Seminary not to accept his resignation. Unfortunately, he did resign from the Seminary two years later.

The 1955 Convention had resolved to finish its business at a recessed session in 1956. And so it did. In the time between sessions, the Missouri Synod had a chance to respond to the Wisconsin Synod Convention. The LCMS passed many resolutions that restated their position or followed the admonition of the Wisconsin Synod. Yet this was not enough. The Standing Committee on Matters of Church Union approached this assignment with “fear and trepidation” so they would not “violate the Word of God and lose the sure foundation on which alone the Lord builds His Church.”⁶⁸ This was not an easy subject to cover. So the Committee presented the following proposal (reprinted in full for the reader):

Even though we deplore the fact that the question of unionism and the controversial issues listed in our Synod’s 1953 resolutions in themselves still remained unresolved, yet

WHEREAS, The resolution of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, declining membership in the Lutheran World Federation, is an excellent statement of Scriptural principle and policy, and lays a better basis for a discussion of the principles of church fellowship and their application; and

WHEREAS, The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod resolved “that hereafter the Common Confession (Part I and II) be not regarded or employed as a functioning basic document toward the establishment of altar and pulpit fellowships with other church bodies”; and

WHEREAS, We understand this to mean that thereby The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod’s 1950 resolutions concerning the Common Confession

⁶⁶ Ibid. pg. 88.

⁶⁷ Ibid. pg. 88.

⁶⁸ Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, Recessed Session of 1955 Convention, pg. 60.

have been set aside; and

WHEREAS, The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod recommended that committees preparing future doctrinal statements take note of the suggestion to make fuller use of antithetic statements; and

WHEREAS, The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod gratefully acknowledges “every fraternal expression of concern and guidance in matters of doctrine and practice” from brethren in the Synodical Conference; therefore be it

RESOLVED, That we concur in the suggestion of our Standing Committee on Matters of Church Union to “hold the judgment of our Saginaw resolutions in abeyance” until our next convention; and be it further

RESOLVED, That our Standing Committee on Matters of Church Union continue to evaluate any further developments in these matters.⁶⁹

In the second proposal, they also resolved:

That our fellowship with the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod be one of vigorously protesting fellowship to be practiced, where necessary, in the light of II Thessalonians 3:14 and 15: “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”⁷⁰

These resolutions were passed but not without dissenting votes. Nineteen delegates registered a “no” vote. Thirty-nine delegates abstained from or were absent at the time of the vote. “Four advisory delegates asked that their names be recorded in protest against the adoption of the report.”⁷¹ These resolutions still did not settle the divisions in the Wisconsin Synod. They remained in an official, yet protesting, fellowship with the Missouri Synod. Officially, fellowship did not end until the 1961 Convention of the Wisconsin Synod. So why was the 1955 Convention so important in the history of the Wisconsin Synod’s fellowship with Missouri?

Conclusion

Although fellowship with the Missouri did not officially end until 1961, the Wisconsin and Missouri Synod’s fellowship was, practically speaking, finished. The two synods would now be suspicious of each other. The Missouri Synod had already emphatically denied any wrong

⁶⁹ Ibid. pg. 60.

⁷⁰ Ibid. pg. 61.

⁷¹ Ibid. pg. 61.

doing on their part, even justifying their actions. Why would these actions end now? There were some improvements at the 1956 Missouri Convention but the convention did not do what Wisconsin wanted them to do.

Since II Thessalonians 3:14 and 15 were used at the end of the proposal to the recessed convention, it sounds like the Missouri Synod was branded as an erring brother. But this did not make it necessary to declare fellowship broken. Instead the Wisconsin Synod would not be keeping company with the Missouri Synod. The two synods were still brothers since the Missouri Synod was not branded as an enemy. There was still hope that the two synods could do whatever was humanly possible to restore the almost broken fellowship.

The 1955 Convention and the Recessed Session did put a strain on the relations between Missouri and Wisconsin. The final resolution of point two (see page 25), made at the recessed session of the convention, encouraged the practice of fellowship only when and where it was necessary. Even this was all done with the view that Missouri was still a brother, albeit a straying one. This Wisconsin Synod Convention did, although not officially, make the first break with the Missouri Synod.

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