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Senior Church History
Prof. Edward C. Fredrich
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Ewings

Preface

This paper is an attempt to catch the flavor of a topic unknown to its author until recently. Several of the booklets of essays from the Lutheran Free Conference are relatively well-known to my generation, but not the Conference itself. Since this Conference is a child of the Wisconsin Synod and its most earnest effort to make an ecumenical outreach to the Christian Church around her, perhaps we could benefit from a clearer understanding of the topic. Free conferences have helped American Lutheranism in the past; will they be such a useful vehicle again in the future?

I would like to express my thanks to Prof. Armin Schuetze who was kind enough to grant me two interviews on the subject. Since he served as the coordinator behind the Free Conference during its entire lifetime, he is a most helpful source.

Notes on the text of this paper:

Because the proper name of this organization was "The Lutheran Free Conference," rather than confuse the reader with the distinction "Conference" for the organization and "conference" for one of the annual assemblies, each individual "conference" is labeled a "session," e.g., "the fourth session of the Lutheran Free Conference, in 1967."

Quotations used with no source given are from personal interviews held with that source in 1985.

Abbreviations used in the text:

LFC = Lutheran Free Conference
AFLC = Association of Free Lutheran Congregations
CLC = Church of the Lutheran Confession
ELS = Evangelical Lutheran Synod
LC-MS [or] Missouri = Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod
SELC = Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (Slovak Synod)
SOCC = State of the Church Conference
WELS [or] Wisconsin = Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

NWL = The Northwestern Lutheran
WLO = Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Periodicals:

Lutheran News (New Haven, Missouri, Herman Otten, ed.)
Volumes 2-8, 1964-1970, various issues. [predecessor to
Christian News]

The Northwestern Lutheran (Milwaukee: Northwestern
Publishing House) Volumes 50-57, 1963-1970, various issues.

Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly (Milwaukee: Northwestern
Publishing House)

Vol. 61:206-210.

Vol. 62:288-292.
Vol. 63:283-285.
Vol. 64:304-306.
Vol. 65:293-294.
Vol. 66:283-284.
Vol. 67:292-293.
Vol. 80:296, 299.

Archival Material:

WELS Archives (6844 N. 107th Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin)
Various archival materials under "Lutheran Free Conference"

"Lutheran Free Conference Journalism Report" (published by
Lutheran Free Conference, 1964-1970) Eckert, Paul G. (1965-
1967, 1970) and Smith, Melvin (1968-1969). [Herein referred
to simply as "Journal"]

Personal Interviews:

Eckert, Paul G. (Pastor at St. Jacobi Lutheran Church,
Greenfield, Wisconsin)

Schuetze, Armin W. (Professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary,
Mequon, Wisconsin)

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L U T H E R A N F R E E C O N F E R E N C E

1964 - 1970

"Quo vadis?" Since the dawn of Christianity the Church has undoubtedly been asking herself that question. To ask such a question is not necessarily an indictment of self-doubt, nor an indication of the loss of chart and compass. To search out the direction in which the Church is moving belongs to the historian. To others falls the task of providing the impetus for such movements. The theologian inherits this latter category of responsibility.

"Quo vadis?" To a degree both theologian and historian have always been asking this question of American Lutheranism. In spite of several attempts, no definite platform of unity has shaped a homogenous, pan-Lutheran grouping up to the present. The Lutheran Confessions have not always held sway over other religious doctrine, neither has anyone been successful in brushing them aside in favor of some other creed. Both the "movers" and the chroniclers rightfully continue to ask, "Quo vadis?"

This paper will attempt to deal with a particular time and situation in American Lutheranism and a particular answer to that situation. It was a time of feverish anxiety over the "Quo vadis?" question and movement makers on both sides of the issue tried to change the course of American Lutheranism. Our attempt will not be to influence the movement, but to record the actions and voices of the history makers.

Before we begin the task proper, let us briefly define the subject of this essay. The Lutheran Free Conference was a legal body, incorporated under the state laws of Illinois. Its raison d'etre was to stem the tide of rising liberalism within the conservative branches of Lutheranism. The mission, purpose, results, and analysis of the Lutheran Free Conference are the subject of this paper.

Lutheran Free Conference Origins

The Lutheran Free Conference originated in America because of a widespread movement within the Lutheran world alignment, a movement meant to bring all Lutherans within one fold. Strictly speaking, this movement could be traced to the days of Philip Melanchthon and his followers. Even in Luther's day, movements were made to align the Protestants into one unified group.

Hand-in-hand with this 20th century attempt to unify all Lutherans was the urge, at least on the part of some, to unite all Protestants, and eventually all Christians. This was, and is, the great goal of ecumenism, and Lutheranism was striding steadily towards that goal.

Although the first inkling of this movement in Lutheran circles was already evident with "Master Philip," it really began to flower in the year of the 300th anniversary of the Reformation. In Luther's land, the government headed by Frederick William III pursued a policy to force a union of Lutheran and Reformed churches. Divisive doctrines were pushed aside in the fervor for unity. Although many saw that there could be no true outward unity since inner unity was completely missing, Frederick William shrewdly hedged his bet that he could consolidate political goals by bringing the churches into one unit.

Frederick was not without religious backing. Many felt it was time to bury the hatchet between religious parties and to effect a true, evangelical union. Rationalism had so intoxicated the doctrinal stands of the compromising parties that there

seemed so little to lose and so "many" to gain.

In the United States, although no political pressure was brought to bear on a union among church bodies, similar forces began to appear. The alignment of Lutheran synods and ministeriums often reflected the theological outlook on this very question of how "Lutheran" a Lutheran body should be.

19th century events significant to this story are the qualified subscriptions to the Lutheran Confessions by the General Synod, the practice of joint Lutheran-Reformed church and communion services, and the 1855 appearance in Lutheran circles of a real reform document, the so-called Definite Platform. The Definite Platform summoned American Lutheranism to revise itself, in fact, it called for a revision of the Augsburg Confession. Reformed doctrine permeated the Definite Platform. Its significance is not so much the impact it had on Lutheranism of its day (it actually brought about increased Confessionalism as a reactionary force) as its value as a harbinger of the following century. Within the next hundred years many of the Lutheran groups that originally rejected the Definite Platform were adhering to its principles in fact, if not in word.

The 400th anniversary of the Reformation brought the merger of several Lutheran groups. A union of the eastern Lutherans (the United Lutheran Church of America [ULCA]) and the formation of a truly national cooperative body among the Lutherans (the National Lutheran Council) occurred in 1917-18. Shaking off their "foreign" spirit as a result of World War I, many Lutherans sought stability through increased size. Size increased much more through merger effort than through mission effort.

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This spirit of "merger mania" among American Lutherans and the world-wide spirit of ecumenism in the 20th century form the backdrop to the LFC. The immediate cause of the Conference stems from this larger movement, but finds its direct roots in the soil of the Synodical Conference.

The participants of the LFC would come almost entirely from the members of the Synodical Conference or from groups that had fractured from it. By the time the first LFC met in 1964 the Synodical Conference was already dead, although it was not officially buried by its two remaining members (the LC-MS and the SELC) until 1967. The collapse of the Synodical Conference followed naturally on the heels of the withdrawal of two of its members. Both the ELS and the WELS had already defected by 1963. The departure of these two bodies from the Synodical Conference stemmed from the same reasons for the creation of the LFC.

The ELS in 1955 and the WELS in 1961 had formally broken off fellowship with the LC-MS. The focus of each breakup was the doctrine of church fellowship; each of the departing synods proving Missouri guilty of unionism. Besides this central problem other doctrinal errors were already beginning to rear their heads. The very nature of this breakup contributed heavily to the framework of the LFC, for each session was held in a manner that avoided a compromise of fellowship practices among people not in doctrinal unity. In addition, almost every one of the seven sessions dealt with one of the doctrinal problems already arising in Missouri and contributing to the Synodical Conference breakup.

The ELS and the WELS were by no means alone in deciphering the doctrinal problems arising in Missouri and elsewhere. Several Confessional movements were afoot in conservative Lutheran circles. In 1961 a group of conservative Confessionalists within the LC-MS formed an organized voice of protest to their synod. Their organizing convention was held in Milwaukee, and the group chose the name "State of the Church Conference" [SOCC]. This group never sent any official representation to the LFC, but its intricate ties to the cause of the LFC can be seen by the fact that the SOCC's Executive Board called a meeting to discuss future plans at the first session of the LFC in 1964!

Parties in the American Lutheran Church also struggled against the onslaught of merger without meaning. The very church body to which these individuals belonged was itself a product of a 1960 merger. As had been the case throughout the century, when this amalgamation took place, the conservative voice of Confessionalism had been drowned in a wave of ecumenism. Not every mouth in the ALC could stomach this, and several of these mouths voiced a Confessional protest. In 1963, as we shall see later, some of these parties held a free conference of their own to voice their convictions concerning the doctrine of the verbally inspired, inerrant Word. These theological leaders took the name Thy Word Alone, Inc., and again, several of these spokesmen were very involved in the Lutheran Free Conference.

Besides these Confessional movements within a parent body, other individuals had broken away from their original synod to hold fast to true doctrinal moorings. Among these bodies were

the Confessional Lutheran Conference, the Orthodox Lutheran Conference, the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation (all of which shared a Missouri background), and the Church of the Lutheran Confessions (primarily a Wisconsin offshoot). Many from these groups would be involved in the LFC also.

History of "Free Conferences"

When the idea of a free conference arose in the 1960's, it was not a new idea. Missouri herself had been deeply involved in two previous free conferences, each with the result of a strong Confessional witness to a thorny theological issue.

The first of these free conferences was held in 1856-1859, and was a direct result of the previously mentioned Definite Platform. These free conferences were called by Dr. C. F. W. Walther in an attempt to draw together the Lutherans in America who subscribed without reservation to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. Two documents, the U.A.C. and the Definite Platform and two theologians, Walther and Dr. Samuel S. Schmucker (author of the Definite Platform) were the real issues of the first of the American free conferences.

The alignments made in those crucial years held fast for about a century and still give the basic outline of American Lutheranism today. The groups rallying around Walther and the cause of the free conferences voiced the conservative Lutheran views and were the backbone of what became the Synodical Conference. The very existence of the Synodical Conference as such can be laid at the feet of these free conferences.

Those rejecting Walther's call for a free conference repre-

sented the more relaxed view of the Lutheran Confessions and spearheaded the drive towards unity among all Lutherans. True irony can be found in the fact that those who were most determined to bring Lutherans into some type of outward union were the very ones least concerned with the documents that defined what Lutheranism is! This irony has not ceased to exist to this very day.

In summary, the results of this first set of free conferences were 1) a marked division between those who strictly subscribed to the Lutheran Confessions in statement and in practice; and 2) the beginning of what became the Synodical Conference.

Again in the years 1903-1906 free conferences were held, but this time it was more of an in-house feud among the Confessional Lutherans of the midwest. At these conferences the differences that had arisen in the Election or Predestination Controversy were under discussion. The synods of the Synodical Conference were represented as well as members of the Ohio and Iowa Synods. The controversy itself arose within the Synodical Conference in the late 1870's and reached its climax in the next decade. These free conferences were part of the attempt to heal synodical rifts stemming from the heat of the controversy.

Another free conference was held in the 1960's in addition to the LFC. This conference only sat for one official meeting. This is the conference called by the group mentioned above, Thy Word Alone. Meeting in Minneapolis on October 29-31, 1963, this conference was made up mainly of members of the ALC. The driving

force behind this conference was Allen R. Blegen, an ALC pastor from Wheaton, Ill. According to a Wisconsin Synod report of this movement, it arose "in opposition to membership in the World Council of Churches." (WLO, 61:207)

This conference was called to address primarily the doctrine of the Word. Those attending came to discuss the verbal inspiration, the inerrancy, and the factual historicity of the Bible. By and large the group was already agreed on their strong stand concerning Scripture. This conference served more to strengthen convictions and to bear witness to doctrine than to win anyone to a new point of view.

Significant to this conference was the strong Confessional stand of at least some of those attending. Armin Schuetze, professor at the WELS seminary, attended the conference by invitation and recalled the force with which Blegen defended the traditional Lutheran view of the papacy as the Anti-Christ. "It's in the Confessions!" Blegen contended. Surely the Wisconsin men felt very much at home with such a theology.

Some features of this conference were not doctrinally pleasing to those who had departed from Missouri over the issue of fellowship, however. Joint devotions and prayers were conducted among men who belonged to church bodies not in fellowship. Schuetze said something of a "Pietistic approach" existed among those making up Thy Word Alone.

The fact that this conference was held less than a year before the formal opening of the Lutheran Free Conference might lead one to believe the LFC grew directly from the Minneapolis conference. This was not the case, however, as we shall shortly

see. Wisconsin's interest in the conference was two-fold, both matters important because Wisconsin's plans for free conferences were well underway. Those two interests were to see how well received a conservative, Confessional conference would be, and secondly to establish further ties across the bounds of Lutheranism. This second goal allowed Wisconsin to have a ready list of those whom it might encourage to attend its own Free Conference.

Formulation of the Lutheran Free Conference

It is no mistake to call the LFC Wisconsin's own, at least as far as the initiation of the LFC is concerned. The idea of free conferences arose in Wisconsin, the initial planning was done by Wisconsin, and most of the early leaders came from Wisconsin.

Wisconsin was in a position where she had very few choices. She could either do nothing and let all the Lutheran world pass by, or hold free conferences. After the break with Missouri the only US bodies in fellowship with Wisconsin were the ELS and the SELC. She would soon sever ties with the latter. Yet the WELS, as a gospel-based church body, felt the need to be an ecumenical voice in the true sense of the word, that is, to testify worldwide to the truths God had revealed. But to the eyes of all the world Wisconsin surely must have appeared to be cold, isolationist, determined to break every bond of unity unless every doctrine was viewed the "Wisconsin way."

Wisconsin desired to strengthen the whole body of believers, not just protect her own members from false doctrine. She wished not only to defend but also to promote the truth of God's Word.

In short, the mission of the Wisconsin Synod remained "to extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church" (Constitution of the WELS, Article IV), to proclaim the everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ to all the world, to witness to every sin-burdened soul that atonement had been made for its sins. But how could Wisconsin accomplish these lofty goals when everyone looked at her as the prude who wouldn't dance with any of her Lutheran partners?

The answer became obvious that she should take the same route that Walther had a hundred years earlier, and promote a free conference to discuss the pertinent doctrinal issues. Only through this method could she both testify and edify without violating her fellowship principles which had led her to her position in the first place.

Just who it was in Wisconsin that first promulgated the idea of free conferences is not clear. [One would guess it might be someone in the seminary's church history department.] Perhaps it occurred to more than one person at the same time. Whatever the circumstances, the president of the WELS could officially voice his church's position by the end of 1962. Oddly enough, this official statement was released in a document rejecting a pan-Lutheran bid for union. President O.J. Naumann lucidly stated the WELS position:

"It has always been the objective of our Synod to strive for the true unity in doctrine and practice among Lutheran church bodies. We are not convinced, however, that this great cause can best be served by joint worship and work prior to attaining a God-pleasing unity in doctrine and practice by reducing certain areas of theology to an ambi-

guous blending of 'yes and no.'" Pastor Naumann stated that the Wisconsin Synod is "fully committed" to such attempts toward unity being carried on through the use of "free conferences." Free conferences, he said, are meetings across synodical lines which do not involve joint prayers and worship and whose purpose is the discussion and resolution of doctrinal differences, not the establishment of a cooperative agency. "This will naturally follow," he said, "when full unity in doctrine and practice has been attained."

(NWL Vol 50, p 24, Jan. 27, 1963. "Wisconsin Synod Declines Parley Bid")

The Wisconsin men knew, however, that its own initiative would have to be transplanted to the minds and hearts of others, or the free conferences would degenerate into one-sided, purely Wisconsin affairs. "Any free conference that was simply set up by the Wisconsin Synod at that point, when we had just broken with Missouri, would have fallen pretty flat," Schuetze surmised. Though originating in Wisconsin, Wisconsin would have to be only an indirect source of establishment, if the free conference was to be born.

The way this was actually accomplished came through the Commission on Doctrinal Matters (the so-called "Union Committee," which had handled the long and difficult break with Missouri) of the WELS. This Committee appointed an Advisory Committee consisting of some of its own members together with other members of the WELS pastorate. This Advisory Committee, in turn, invited a group of Confessional, conservative Lutherans from across synodical lines "to form an Arrangements Committee for a Lutheran Free Conference." ("Minutes of the Arrangements Committee, 7/25/63;" WELS Archives)

Thus the final plan developed. This committee held its first meeting July 25, 1963. The Arrangements Committee was hand-

picked by Wisconsin's Union Committee, but the membership of the Arrangements Committee was broad enough to make it clear this was no longer just a WELS' project. To be sure, the entire committee shared Wisconsin's views and concerns, but that was because of their own personal confession, not because of any suggestion or coercion from Wisconsin. In fact, it would be hard to imagine a group less likely to cower to anyone's wishes than this Arrangements Committee. Each man held deep-seated convictions that bound him tightly to the truth of God's Word and a sincere subscription to the Lutheran Confessions.

Appearing by invitation as the first Arrangements Committee were the following:

--Rev. L.W. Faulstick (LC-MS)	--Rev. Armin Schuetze (WELS)
-- " Norman Berg (WELS)	-- " Harold W. Romoser (no
-- " John O. Lang (ALC)	affiliation, formerly LC-MS)
-- " B. W. Teigen (ELS)	--Rev. Carl W. Lawrenz (WELS)
-- " Allen R. Blegen (ALC)	-- " Siegbert Becker (WELS,
-- " Vernon Harley (LC-MS)	formerly LC-MS)

Invited, but not present was Rev. Glenn Reichwald (ELS). Two visitors were present, Rev. Donald G. Rehkopf (ALC) [who was added to the Committee later in the day] and Rev. Oscar J. Naumann (President of the WELS). ("Minutes of the Arrangements Committee, 7/25/63;" WELS Archives)

Schuetze, as the acting chairman of the Advisory Committee, called the meeting to order by calling for a few moments of silence for individual prayer. Officers of the new Arrangements Committee were then elected, with Schuetze elected chairman; Lang, vice-chairman; and Harley as secretary.

Two fundamental points covered that first day laid the groundwork for the function and the framework of the Free Confer-

ence. The first point dealt with a memorandum from the Advisory Committee calling for the definition, purpose, and feasibility of free conferences. The second point dealt entirely with the external plan of the Free Conference.

From this point on, the Lutheran Free Conference was a functioning form in American Lutheranism. The following sections will deal with both function and form, but for now consider the coup de grace Wisconsin had effected. A Conference designed to promote unity among all Lutherans in America came about via the initiative of Wisconsin. This is significant in view of the many misunderstandings concerning the Wisconsin Synod's attitude toward meeting with other Lutherans. Wisconsin, too, shared the goal of Lutheran unity, but she refused to move towards that goal in any way that would compromise her standards as a Lutheran body. In the Lutheran Free Conference she could speak openly with her fellow Lutherans without crossing her conscience.

Lutheran Free Conference Purposes

As is the case with most agencies called together in a time of strife, the Lutheran Free Conference existed for more than one purpose. Not all of those purposes were stated outrightly, although the organizers would have freely admitted to them. In other words, there was an agenda and a "hidden agenda" to the Lutheran Free Conference. In addition to these planned purposes, some of the ends some of the participants desired were clearly repudiated by the Free Conference organizers.

The first meeting of the Arrangements Committee dealt with this foremost task of defining a "free conference" and then defining the purpose(s) of such a conference. The minutes of that meeting shed light primarily on what the Conference intended to avoid more than its positive purposes:

Question 2: What Would Be The Purpose of a Free Conference? brought about the following discussion:

Rev. Norman Berg emphasized that the Doctrinal Committee of the Wisconsin Synod does not wish for this conference to have as its purpose the numerical strengthening of its own Synod through proselytizing among other synods; neither should it be that of outward organization.

Rev. John Lang raised a question regarding "Selective Fellowship," asking whether this group might not be accused of practising this principle. It was agreed that religious fellowship is not to be practised in this meeting, nor in the conference. This should rather be and remain one of the goals to be achieved by the conference. ("Minutes of Arrangements Committee, 7/25/63;" WELS Archives)

An organization cannot survive for long by only being against something, no matter how objectionable that matter may be, no matter how large a group may be opposed to it. Certainly the LFC faced that trap, but the organizers and participants did not

allow themselves to fall into it. The Articles of Incorporation already show the positive aspect of the LFC's purpose. When filing for incorporation, the LFC had to state "the purpose or purposes for which the corporation is organized." That blank was filled in in the following way:

To formulate and execute plans for the promotion of doctrinal unity among members of the Lutheran Church by means of conferences, publications, and such other methods as may from time to time be found to be desirable and necessary for the advancement of this objective.
("Articles of Incorporation," WELS Archives)

(In personal correspondence, Harold Romoser remarked concerning this official purpose: "It is usually advised that the statement of purpose be very broadly worded.")

In an early press release, an Arrangements Committee memorandum is quoted as saying that it did not "conceive the purpose of this conference to be a re-alignment of churches as such, but rather the bringing about of confessional oneness of those who are interested in true Scriptural unity" and as an "attempt to curb liberalism in the Lutheran Church." (WELS Archives)

The Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, which served in a semi-official position as mouthpiece for the LFC, in summarizing the first of the Conferences reiterated this single purpose: to "provide pastors and laymen who are concerned about an uncompromising confession of doctrines currently being jeopardized in the Lutheran Church a forum for mutual strengthening with the ultimate objective to obtain full unity in doctrine and practice."
(WLQ, 61:207)

This is the most clearcut and most important purpose of the LFC. All other purposes and aims of the Conference's organizers and participants either lead to, or flow from, this main purpose.

The call of the day among the conservative, Confessional Lutherans was for a place to speak, a forum from which to make its case for the cause of Christianity. Confessional Christians of all ages are not nearly as concerned about the results of their work as they are about the chance to spread their faith and to strengthen the weaker brethren who may be wavering in that faith. Such was the case for the LFC, first and foremost.

In order to achieve this purpose, an auxiliary purpose would have to be to identify and contact those who were committed to Confessional Lutheranism. It is an interesting story in itself how that was carried out, as we shall see in a later chapter of this story, but in order to mutually strengthen, one had to find those who had not sold their theological souls to rationalism, humanism, or the historical-critical method. This greatly limited the field of participation for the LFC.

In the eyes of the organizers, every human soul was a fit cause for carrying out this Conference; however, they did not try to reach that entire audience. Keep in mind the historical setting of 1963-64. The Synodical Conference was effectively disbanded; both the ELS and the WELS had recently broken with Missouri; a new wave of "progressive thought" was sweeping through Missouri. Even in the American political arena a conservative-liberal confrontation was scheduled for the November presidential election.

In view of the problems that had developed in the LC-MS, that synod was of special concern for the LFC. There was the hope that by clear, Confessional discussion in open forum some of

the problems could be abated. A second reason Missouri was of special concern was for the sake of the many lay and clergy members of that synod who still did confess the same things as the Lutheran Confessions. They needed this strengthening in their convictions, and also a chance to meet with the various other church groups who had been forced to declare an end of fellowship. The nurturing of these elements, especially in Missouri, also was a purpose of the LFC.

Ultimate Purpose

All of these purposes contributed to a hoped-for ultimate purpose, namely the establishment of "full unity in doctrine and practice." No one, however, considered this the sine qua non. That description could apply only to the purpose of providing the open forum many felt Confessional Lutheranism needed so desperately. On the other hand, no one envisioned this open forum to be a blind alley, a meandering path to nowhere. Lutheran theologians of the Confessional stripe hoped that in a thorough discussion of disputed doctrines, such discussion, being based on God's Word and the Lutheran Confessions, would lead to complete unity. The fulfillment of this lofty purpose would never reach the heights of the zeal that must have accompanied this fervent desire.

One interesting purpose was proposed during the course of the sessions of the LFC. In 1966 a movement from the floor of the Conference asked the Arrangements Committee to consider the feasibility of publishing a theological journal under the auspices of the LFC. This proposed arrangement could allow for

world-wide contributions by conservative Lutherans, while at the same time not limiting the choice of theologians to one particular synod or body.

After deliberating the matter the Arrangements Committee at the 1967 session resolved not to make such a venture, citing financial reasons as well as the fact that "publication of a magazine does not fit the purpose and scope of the Lutheran Free Conference....Said magazine would not serve its purpose unless there were unity of doctrine and purpose in its pages; and such unity is still a matter of exploration in this conference."

("Minutes of the Arrangements Committee, 7/19/67;" WELS Archives)
The Conference floor supported the decision of the Arrangements Committee.

Unstated Purposes

"Several members [of the Arrangements Committee] expressed appreciation of the fact that the initiative for this conference came from the Wisconsin Synod. This, they felt, is significant in view of the many misunderstandings that have gone out regarding the Wisconsin Synod's attitude toward meeting with other Lutherans." This statement, taken from the minutes of the Arrangement Committee's organizational meeting, points to an definite purpose behind the LFC, albeit not stated as such. Wisconsin desired to introduce itself as an ecumenical force in Christianity.

Most church bodies would deride this last statement. "Wisconsin! Interested in ecumenicity?! Ha!" Schuetze remarked, "At that time we appeared to be the kind of people that didn't want to talk with anyone else." Carl Lawrenz, of the WELS'

seminary, explained that the Wisconsin Synod had been put into the position of having to say "no" so long that it had become time to say "yes" to something, hence to take the initiative in a conference like this. ("Minutes of the Arrangements Committee, 7/25/63;" WELS Archives)

While this purpose would never make it into the printed material published under the imprimatur of the LFC, it is nevertheless clear that Wisconsin was striving to introduce itself to mainstream Lutheranism through this vehicle. Wisconsin was viewed as some sort of reactionary group, perhaps even suspect in regards to certain doctrines because of its conservatism. Since it refused any form of fellowship without previous doctrinal agreement, Wisconsin was persona non grata in Lutheran circles in general. This mistaken view Wisconsin hoped to amend with the more correct view that it was deeply concerned with the state of Confessionalism among all Lutherans, but that it would not try to discuss its concerns in a forum that already violated its doctrinal stand.

With this in mind, Wisconsin's "one-two punch" in defining the unstated purposes of the LFC was to introduce itself to mainstream Lutheranism and to end the "isolationist" view some had concerning Wisconsin.

Another unstated purpose which Schuetze saw in retrospect (15 years after the last session of the LFC) was the Arrangements Committee's attempt to "attract from the Missouri Synod (for example) some of the prominent men whom we knew felt [the same way we did]; for instance, a man like Robert Preus [and] some men

connected with their seminaries." These purposes went entirely unfulfilled, however, as we shall see later. It should be kept in mind that the LFC organizers had no vision of reforming or redefining the Missouri Synod; however, they did hope to have some effect in their "mutual strengthening" also among some of the high-level leaders of Missouri.

Although all the foregoing parts of the "hidden agenda" were never really hidden by Wisconsin, merely unstated, there were other purposes that the WELS organizers would have preferred not only to remain unstated and hidden, but unheard of as well. The following purposes permeated certain quarters of the LFC, although they were never sanctioned (at least publicly) by any of the LFC organizers.

There were those searching for an organizational union. Since most American Confessional Lutherans considered the demise of the Synodical Conference as the greatest of tragedies, there was the constant hope that a replacement for that body could be found. The LFC appeared to some to be a ready-made answer to that hope. By the third session of the Conference (1966), Theodore Aaberg of the ELS would make this assessment on the floor of the LFC:

The downfall of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference as a bulwark of confessional Lutheranism has been a distinct loss to all of us and to many others throughout the world. We need a new form to take its place, and by a faithful confession of the truth give light, courage, direction, and assistance to Lutherans and others the world over who have found their old congregation or church body completely cut adrift from the old moorings. Let us not be afraid to work for the establishment of a new conference. (Lutheran News, Vol 4:15, p 8) (Ironically, it was Aaberg who at this conference introduced what became the most

devisive of all the essays at any session of the LFC.)

That some were sure they were on the path to organizational union can be adduced by the remark of an unnamed speaker from the floor of the 1966 session. In a discussion of fellowship he said, "Other things beside sin keep [us] from having worship together. It is wholesome to confess that we are bound in our confessional relationships. Once synodical ties are realigned, it might be much easier. Meanwhile, don't be offended if we cannot worship together." ("Journal" 1966 LFC, p 22, emphasis mine)

Some observers of the LFC felt there was another unsanctioned purpose which became evident during the course of the sessions. Paul G. Eckert, the Conference's primary journalist, asserted that for some, attending the Free Conference became a way of making a statement regarding their position without speaking to the doctrinal issues within their own circles. Most of this criticism was leveled at Missourians. Eckert said, "By keeping in the Free Conference, some of these people who should have been taking action were perhaps satisfied. [As if they were saying] 'We're in the Free Conference; we're speaking our piece; we're showing [that] we're conservatives,' but [they were] not doing anything about it."

In the 1968 session of the LFC, that very point was made from the floor of the Conference that these conferences dare not become a way of life "in that they ease one's conscience by participating in solid Bible study while indefinitely continuing as a member in a church body that teaches or tolerates error."

(WLQ Vol 66, p 294) While the purpose of the Conference was "mutual strengthening," the purpose of such strengthening was that "those who are strengthened may prove themselves uncompromising confessors....What form such confessing must take in the case of each individual, the Free Conference can not prescribe." (Ibid.)

It was also a concern that some might make of the LFC a "fundamentalist" group in the truest sense of the word. One fundamental, the divine inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, was the rallying point for all participants of the LFC. Generally speaking, it was only the conservative Lutherans who held to this doctrine. The gross errors of liberal interpretation of God's Word tended to unify those opposed to such a hermenutical principle.

In this framework, some undoubtedly looked at the LFC as the panacea for Lutheran ills. Oblivious to doctrinal differences, these "fundamentalists" wanted to declare fellowship without true doctrinal unity. In this way, the LFC was in danger of becoming a home for pan-conservative fellowship within the framework of American Lutheranism. Again, an unsanctioned purpose, but one that was present on the floor of the Conference. To wit:

It is good to be here. What we have heard is good for all of us. Consider how much agreement there has been in the essays thus far....What is meant by agreement on all doctrines? We can always bicker. We already have full unity in agreeing on Scripture. I am not saying that we should merge, but certainly we should be able to have prayer, pulpit, and altar fellowship. We should face realistically what we have together, not nitpick. ("Journal," 1966, p 21)

There are no surprises in the fact that not everyone envisioned the same purposes for the Lutheran Free Conference. Those behind the movement would have genuinely been satisfied simply with the discussion of biblical doctrine in an open forum limited only by the Lutheran Confessions. Under such circumstances their purpose "to give testimony and to let the Holy Ghost work through His Word" ("Minutes of Arrangements Committee, 7/25/63" p 3) would have been sufficient to them; indeed, it would have provided all they hoped for. That such fruitful discussion would help end the "isolationist" attitude towards the WELS and her ilk and bring Wisconsin to the mainstream of American Lutheranism was fine with the LFC organizers.

Rejected as purposes were organizational union (especially where true doctrinal unity was not apparent), or the founding of a network of conservative fellowship clinging to the framework of the erring synods. Nevertheless, some LFC participants desired and urged these unsanctioned ends.

Basis of Lutheran Free Conference

We shall consider two main aspects of the LFC under the topic "basis:" briefly a review of the mode of operation (format), and secondly the actual basis of operation--the guidelines by which the LFC established itself.

Most of what might be said about the mode of operation was previously discussed under the self-limiting definition of the "free conference." Each session was held without any official synodical representation. (O.J. Naumann was excluded from membership on the Arrangements Committee for the very reason that he was the president of the WELS.) Each session was a "meeting of individuals who meet as free agents, not representing their church bodies as such." (WLQ, 61:207)

As one must expect from the WELS, the format of the LFC would also include a plank disallowing joint devotions "because of the various confessional backgrounds." ("Journal" 1965, p 1) The planned basis here ruled out expressions of fellowship where unity did not exist. Only in the event that full doctrinal accord could eventually be reached would fellowship be allowed; indeed, then it would be expected as a natural outgrowth.

As to the matter of expressing the format of operation, that basis centered on two simple, yet in the ecumenical age, poorly understood tenets: "agreement on the doctrine of the inerrancy, inspiration, authority, and historicity of Scripture, and on the necessity of doctrinal unity as a prerequisite for joint worship and church work." (WLQ, 61:207)

Even this agreement on Scripture needed defining in a time that was turbulent for American Lutheranism. The basis for such

definition was the Lutheran Confessions--all of them. The Confessions did not define scriptural doctrine, but all were convinced they formed a proper interpretation of Scripture. (Norma normata in relation to Scripture, but norma normans in relation to doctrinal unity.)

Establishing such a firm foundation allowed the Free Conference to operate under a sense of unity and purpose. The date of the first session marked a time when world Lutheranism was foundering on any statement of scriptural doctrine (witness the LWF meeting at Helsinki, 1963). It also limited those who would be inclined and invited to attend the LFC.

Participation

In considering participation in the Lutheran Free Conference, there are four groups to be considered: the inviters and invitees, the attendees and "exclusees." Each group tells us something about the Free Conference.

No one ever had the idea that the Free Conference would be a free-for-all. The inviters, those who formulated the LFC, realized this had not been the case in 1856 when Walther called for free conferences to discuss the Definite Platform in relation to the U.A.C. In the 1960's, as in the 1850's, the call was issued by solid, sound, Confessional Lutherans to good, solid Lutherans who at least said they agreed with the Lutheran Confessions.

Just who were those Lutherans issuing the call? We have already answered that question, generally speaking, by listing those who came up with the idea of the LFC and the initial Arrangements Committee. The common thread linking all these

leaders is their conservative, Confessional stance. Of course, there were many in all the representative synods who held to these same principles. Over the course of the sessions the Arrangements Committee added at one time or another the following:

--Rev. K.F. Koeplin (WELS)	--Rev. Arnold Kuster (ELS)
--Mr. Marcus Braun (LC-MS)	--Prof. Conrad Frey (WELS)
--Rev. Milton Tweit (ELS)	--Mr. Robt. Frick (LC-MS)
--Mr. Fred Rutz (WELS)	--Prof. Julian Anderson (ELS)
--Rev. Alfred Hanisch (ALC)	--Mr. Carroll Dumann (WELS)
--Rev. A.T. Kretzmann (Ind)	--Rev. Kent Spaulding (ALC)
--Rev. Otto Krause (LC-MS)	--Rev. Erich Waldek (LCA)
--Rev. James Schaefer (WELS)	--O.J. Eckert (CLC)

[Synod membership is given at the time of each party's initial affiliation with the Arrangements Committee. Not every person began or ended his ministry/affiliation with the synod listed.]

All the members of the Arrangements Committee, together with the personal contacts they had, each in his own circle, placed names on a contact list. Especially at the first session, this was not an "open" conference, but one of special invitation, except in the case of the WELS, the ELS, and the SELC. These three groups were issued an open invitation through their various official publications. (NWL Vol 51:3, Feb. 9, '64, p 41)

How the Arrangements Committee got the initial invitation into the hands of those for whom it was searching is an interesting story. After the Arrangements Committee members submitted lists of names to the publicity chairman, Armin Schuetze ["We wanted to attract whoever was a fairly conservative Lutheran": Schuetze], he personally saw to it that the nearly 400 (NWL Vol 51:3, p 41) parties listed each received a personal letter of invitation. [Fortunately for Schuetze, he had several children taking typing lessons at the time, each of whom received adequate

typing practice via the official invitations of the LFC!] Each of these personal letters also included a brochure explaining the purpose and goals of the Conference, an invitation proper, and a request for names of additional parties who might be interested in the LFC.

Official notification of the first session (and each subsequent session) was given through the synod newspapers referred to above. Additionally, Lutheran News also published information and invitations to every session of the LFC, but not on an official basis. In 1965 James Schaefer of the WELS became chairman of the Publicity Committee, and in that year the LFC also advertised in Christianity Today. Since the general assessment was made that this avenue of publicity was not really beneficial to the LFC's potential constituency, this outreach effort was soon dropped. "It was reported there were only two or three responses (one from England)." ("Minutes of the Arrangements Committee, 7/12/65;" WELS Archives)

Through these various methods: personal recommendation, official and unofficial publications, and word-of-mouth, the message got out to the various corners of Confessional Lutheranism that the LFC met with the purpose of mutual strengthening on the basis of an inerrant, authoritative Scripture, and of a full, unreserved subscription to the Lutheran Confessions.

Just who were those who responded to this call? Several breakdowns can be given in reply: alignment by synod, geography, professional occupation; and those who attended merely in thought and in prayer. These alignments varied from session to session,

but some generalities can be cited.

Attendance peaked near 300 for the three-day sessions in 1964, 1965, and 1967. Generally 200-250 attended the sessions, although attendance dropped dramatically in the last two sessions. As many as 25% of those attending were laymen, a fact very pleasing to the organizers. Each session consisted of deep theological thought by learned theologians; that such discussion would attract a large percentage of laymen showed how deeply concerned they were about the state of Lutheranism and how deep their understanding was.

Two factors contributed to a concentration of mid-westerners dominating the attendance figures: 1) The conservative Lutheran synods in America were for the most part mid-western, and 2) Each session was held in a mid-western city. Although the request came to regionalize the Conference, such plans never came to fruition.

Each party attending any session of the LFC had to make all financial and travel arrangements for him/herself. The only ones officially reimbursed for their expenses were the essayists, reactors, and members of the Arrangements Committee. All others had to arrange their presence by including the LFC in vacation plans and expenses. This was not a convenient, paid junket for any of the men and women in attendance. The Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly noted in reference to the first session, "That under such circumstances a sizeable number...attended indicates the deep concern these men have, in view of the 'liberalism' that marks much Lutheran thought today, for the continuance of true

confessionalism in the Lutheran Church today." (WLO, Vol 61, p 208) This is undoubtedly true.

Concerning synod affiliation of those attending--one might guess Wisconsin and Missouri outweighed all others, both because of size and the state of urgent concern. That is exactly the case. The second session gave the following synodical breakdown, which is probably representative of the regular registration:

- WELS = 58
- LC-MS = 49
- ELS = 19
- ALC = 14
- LCR = 5
- CLC = 2 (Church of the Lutheran Confession)
- AFLC = 2
- LCA = 2
- CLC = 1 (Concordia Lutheran Conference)
- All others were independent or unaffiliated.

Besides the registrants, many attended in a non-official capacity. The "Lutheran Witness" sent a full-time reporter as an observer to some of the sessions. Pastor A. Wessler, Administrative Assistant to LC-MS Pres. Oliver Harms, when asked to give a personal response to the third session of the LFC issued a terse, "No comment!" (sic) (Lutheran News, 4:15, July 25, 1966, p 2) This unofficial, non-participatory attitude of the LC-MS leadership points out one of the loggerheads which the LFC faced. While trying to reach a point of mutual agreement, the LFC leadership was convinced they stood squarely on God's Word and the Lutheran Confessions while the LC-MS leadership would not admit it had anything to learn. Neither party felt it had a doctrinal problem.

Eventually attendance also included a small number of Lutherans from other countries. Dr. Arnaldo Schueler (LC-MS) of

Porto Alegre, Brazil, was even an essayist at the final session. Others included Dr. Hans Kirsten from Germany, the Rev. Wilbert Kreiss from France, and the Rev. John Ibarra from Mexico.

One final category of Lutherans participated in the LFC, although they may have never attended in person. Five of the LFC sessions published the Conference essays; these were sent to every Conference member, and also sold to any interested party. In this way, many who could not attend the LFC sessions were able to learn from the doctrinal essays, and in this way be "mutually strengthened."

Some American Lutherans were definitely not invited to participate in the LFC. Basically the point of departure was each man's theology concerning the Word of God. The first session of the LFC dealt with the topic of Scripture and the assembly came to quick and widespread, if not complete, unanimity on the doctrinal presentations. This is most understandable, for the assembly agreed on that doctrine before they were ever invited to come! That was the reason they were invited.

Those that took a compromising attitude toward the conservative Lutheran view of the Bible, the Lutheran Confessions, and subscription to those Confessions both in doctrine and in practice were simply not invited to the LFC. Schuetze made it clear that those who had clearly abrogated this basis of biblical discussion were not invited to participate in the LFC. "We didn't want Martin Marty at the Free Conference."

Content, Conflict, and Consensus

The topic of the entire doctrinal content of the Lutheran Free Conference is far beyond the scope of this paper. For the sake of chronicling the essence of each session, the following brief synapses are given, listing essays and essayists; dates and sites; significant points of convergence and divergence; and perhaps an interesting sidelight or two.

Lutheran Free Conference -- Session One Waterloo, Iowa -- July 7-9, 1964

Topic: The doctrine of the Scriptures and their inspiration, revelation, clarity, etc.

Eight essays presented, taking particular note of the effects of neo-orthodoxy, form criticism, demythologizing, the dialectical method and existential philosophy upon the view of Scripture.

Essays and essayists: (All essayists serving as parish pastors unless title is cited.)

Vernon Harley: The Content and Purpose of Scripture.

Dr. Siegbert Becker: The Verbal, Plenary Inspiration of the Scriptures.

Prof. Bjarne W. Teigen: Scripture as Revelation.

A.R. Blegen: The Inerrancy of the Scripture.

John O. Lang: The Authority of Scripture.

Prof. Carl Lawrenz: The Clarity of Scripture.

Kenneth Miller: Biblical Interpretation.

Prof. Julian Anderson: Scripture and Tradition in Relation to the Church.

Significant items: The LFC got off to a good start with appropriate enthusiasm. Although almost all the Conference participants agreed on this doctrine before attending, such unanimity was rare in American Lutheranism. This important agreement on the doctrine of Scripture laid the groundwork for all further doctrinal discussions, upon which not all Conference participants were agreed.

Publication: No statement of doctrinal agreement was issued, although "it would not seem difficult for the vast majority of those present to set up and agree upon a...clear statement concerning the doctrine of the Scripture." (WLG 61:209)

Northwestern Publishing House later published all Conference essays under the title This Steadfast Word. Conference "Journal" was compiled, but of quality inferior to all succeeding "Journals."

Lutheran Free Conference -- Session Two
Cedar Rapids, Iowa -- July 13-15, 1965

Topic: Justification, the central truth of the Scriptures.

Six essays covering the various aspects of this doctrine under the theme, "Justification -- God and Sinners Reconciled."

Essays and essayists:

Prof. Armin W. Schuetze: The Presupposition of Justification: The Sin of Man and the Holiness of God.

Herman Otten: The Meaning of Justification: A Word Study.

Paul H. Burgdorf: The Basis of Justification: The Work of Christ and the Grace of God.

Torald Teigen: The Proclamation of Justification: The Gospel Message of Forgiveness.

Norbert Reim: The Appropriation of Justification: Justifying Faith.

Donald G. Rehkopf: The Fruit of Justification: A Sanctified Life.

Significant items: The topic dealt with what was always considered the articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae, however there was a special earnestness on the part of many of these Confessional Lutherans, in view of the fact that the Lutheran World Federation, meeting in Helsinki in 1963, had been unable to come up with a statement on justification agreeable to its constituency.

The death of Paul E. Kretzmann was announced to the Conference floor on July 13.

Publication: Partially in response to the LWF meeting in Helsinki, the LFC drew up a definitive statement, although many protest, since it was not the purpose of the LFC to draw up such statements. NPH published all Conference essays under the title His Pardoning Grace.

Lutheran Free Conference -- Session Three
Columbus, Ohio -- July 12-14, 1966

Topic: The doctrine of the Church.

Six essays under the theme "The Holy Christian Church and True Ecumenicity." Attempted to deal not only with the ecumenical issue, but also the historic Wisconsin-Missouri divergence.

Essays and essayists:

Winfred Schaller: The Essence of the Church and True Ecumenicity.

Prof. Milton Otto: The Creation of the Church.

Otto Krause: The Marks of the Church.

Prof. Oscar Siegler: The Mission of the Church.

Theodore Aaberg: The Functioning Forms of the Church.

Harold Romoser: The Fellowship of the Church.

Significant items: For the first time, discord settled over the LFC. Sparked by Aaberg's (an ELS pastor from Scarville, Iowa) essay in particular, the old debate between the WELS' and the LC-MS' doctrine on Church and Ministry is renewed with vigor. The panelist chosen as reactor to Aaberg's essay, the Rev. Hugo Degner of the LC-MS, asked for "equal time" to present the "Missouri position." The rift was especially evident in those representing the LCR, some of whom later left the LFC over this issue. First case of doctrine preventing any sentiment of agreement.

Publication: No doctrinal booklet issued in view of discord. All Conference participants received a copy of the essays and the "Journal."

Lutheran Free Conference -- Session Four
Chicago, Illinois -- July 18-20, 1967

Topic: Same as previous year, hoping to settle the doctrinal issue.

Six essays presented, some in pairs to set forth possible conflicting teachings.

Essays and essayists:

James K. Blumhorst: What Church Do You Mean?

Prof. W. R. Gawrisch: " " " " "

Vernon Harley: Who Are Christ's Ministers?

Arthur Dahms: " " " "

Herman A. Preus: What Is the Church's Mission Today?

James Schaefer: How Does Scriptural Confessionalism Minister to the Entire Holy Christian Church?

Significant items: Blumhorst (LC-MS pastor from Tomball, Texas) was chosen to give a balanced view of Missouri's position, but read an essay strongly endorsing what is the traditional Wisconsin position on the Church. The rift widened, some who hold to the divine institution of the local congregation no longer continue with the LFC (including one of the original members of the Arrangements Committee, Harold Romoser). Many questions left unanswered.

Publication: Same policy as previous year. No agreement = no publication.

Lutheran Free Conference -- Session Five
Minneapolis, Minnesota -- July 7-9, 1968

Topic and theme: "Jesus Christ -- Fact or Fiction?" Again a topic not controverted in these circles, but under serious attack by modern theology. Six essays dealing with the Person and work of Christ.

Essays and essayists:

Prof. Siegbert Becker: Jesus Christ, Son of God and Man -- Fact, Not Fiction.

George Orvick: Jesus Christ, the Humble Servant -- Fact, Not Fiction.

Prof. Robert Voss: Jesus Christ, the Exalted Lord -- Fact, Not Fiction.

E.P. Kauffeld: Jesus Christ, the Promised Messiah -- Fact, Not Fiction.

Erich W. Waldek: Jesus Christ, the Only Hope of the World -- Fact, Not Fiction.

Significant items: The essays present a Scriptural, timely message on the subject of Christology. For the first (and only) time, an LCA theologian served as essayist (Waldek).

Publication: In addition to "Journal" of the LFC, NPH again publishes each of the Conference essays, under the title Jesus Christ -- Fact or Fiction?

Lutheran Free Conference -- Session Six
Davenport, Iowa -- July 29-31, 1969

Topic and theme: "God, the Holy Spirit, Acts."

Five essays dealt with the work of the Holy Spirit, involving particularly a consideration of the Means of Grace.

Essays and essayists:

Arthur Drevlow: God, the Holy Spirit, Acts to Build the Church.

George Tiefel: God, the Holy Spirit, Acts in Both Law and Gospel.

Prof. Bjarne Teigen: God, the Holy Spirit, Acts through Baptism.

Prof. Martin Lutz: God, the Holy Spirit, Acts through the Lord's Supper.

Prof. Paul Eickmann: God, the Holy Spirit, Acts to Spiritually Comfort and to Eternally Glorify the Church (Una Sancta).

Significant items: A marked decrease in attendance for the first time. This is generally attributed to two synodical conventions -- Missouri's shortly before, and Wisconsin's shortly after the LFC. Both the Arrangements Committee and the Conference floor give serious consideration to postponing the next session. The decision is left to the Arrangements Committee, who later plan another session for the following year.

In a twist of irony the WLG article describing this session of the LFC is followed immediately by an article announcing formal establishment of fellowship relations between the LC-MS and the ALC.

Publication: "Journal" was sent to all participants as well as the NPH publication God, the Holy Spirit, Acts, the collection of Conference essays.

Lutheran Free Conference -- Session Seven
Rockford, Illinois -- July 14-16, 1970

Topic and theme: "The Way to Lutheran Unity."

Five essays forming an exposition and application of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. A serious look at the Ecumenical Movement, especially among Lutherans, under the message "satis est" of Article VII.

Essays and essayists:

Dr. Julius E. Farup: Let God's Word Be God's Word.

Torald N. Teigen: Let the Gospel Be the Gospel.

Rollin Reim: Let the Church Be the Church.

Dr. Arnaldo Schueler (of Porto Alegre, Brazil): Let Unity Be Unity.

Winfred A. Koelpin: Let Church Work Be Church Work.

Significant items: Enthusiastic unanimity on a doctrine widely discounted in the Ecumenical Age, namely the understanding of Article VII of the Augsurg Confession. "There was no question but that the words 'For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments' call for a broad understanding of the term 'Gospel' to include all of Scripture teaching." (WLG 67:293)

In attendance are several theologians from abroad. The Arrangements Committee announces there will be no session in 1971. In the fall of 1971 the Arrangements Committee would meet to assess the feasibility of another session. It was generally felt the Lutheran Free Conference had spent its course and that this would be the last session. This proved to be the case.

Publication: NPH published The Way to Lutheran Unity, a summary of the Conference's work in this session. The last issue of the "Journal" was prepared and distributed to all participants.

LUTHERAN FREE CONFERENCE

ANALYSIS

In reviewing the Lutheran Free Conference, two methods of analysis should be employed. First, did the Conference meet the agenda of purpose it set for itself, and secondly, did the Conference serve any purpose in the Church at large. Both of these are fair and legitimate criteria, the following is an attempt to chronicle the answers to those questions.

In assembling the LFC, an early purpose was to identify the Confessional Lutherans in America. Using a somewhat unusual method, this goal was carried out sufficiently. More than once the wish was expressed from the floor of the Conference that more Lutherans would participate, since the intense study of God's Word could have only a positive effect. Unfortunately, the mass of American Lutheranism chose not to join in the LFC, but the Conference was able to identify and assemble a good portion of America's most Confessional leaders.

That more of the conservative Lutherans in the LC-MS did not participate may have been due to pressure from that synod's leadership. In describing the LFC's attempt to reach out to the broad face of Lutheranism, James Schaefer reported to the Arrangements Committee ("Minutes of the Arrangements Committee, 10/29/64;" WELS Archives) that "fair outreach in publicity had been obtained through Religious News Service, very scant through other media. He read Dr. Oliver Harms' statement in 'A Memo to the Brethren' in which the freedom and purpose of the conference had been questioned."

Armin Schuetze affirmed that that attitude was present in Missouri. In at least one case tentative agreement had been made with one of the LC-MS seminary professors to make a presentation to the LFC, but the Missouri man suddenly withdrew his name from consideration. Other attempts to draw in the LC-MS seminary leadership were made, but always the same answer, "sorry." "We felt word was around [in the Missouri Synod], that it's better not to go to the Free Conference," Schuetze said.

The LFC had good success in identifying and drawing Confessional Lutherans, but this is a case where one might pine, "Oh, what might have been!" If only other Lutheran bodies had given as much attention to the LFC as they paid to the Lutheran World Federation....

The Wisconsin Synod also saw the LFC as an arena in which to introduce itself to the broader spectrum of American Lutheranism, and in which to end the isolationist view so many held of her. How did she succeed? Quite well, in some respects. The limiting factor is again the pre-Conference prejudice against Wisconsin which kept many away. Those that came to the LFC overcame the caricature often held of the WELS. "You can talk to Wisconsin Synod people," they discovered. While this may not be startling to a native "Wisconsiner," it evidently was a revelation to more than one Lutheran.

To an extent, this familiarity fostered such a feeling of acceptance, that it may have also bred contempt on the part of those synods who lost members to Wisconsin. Wisconsin's leaders were perfectly honest in claiming they did not seek to prosely-

tize among other Lutheran bodies. However, more than one man realized after coming into closer contact with the WELS that this was the church body in which he really belonged. "In fact, we sometimes felt we had difficulty keeping non-Wisconsin people on the Arrangements Committee. They would get on the Committee and...soon become Wisconsin Synod," Schuetze wryly remarked.

In this connection, the present chairman of the Church History department at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary teaches his students that the WELS is the successor to the Synodical Conference of North America. Partially through the LFC at least some of the other Confessional Lutherans of North America came to that same opinion. In the eyes of conservative Lutherans outside her boundaries, Wisconsin made great gains through the LFC. To some, the ground upon which she stood was important enough that they moved within her boundaries.

The LFC first met three years after the WELS broke off fellowship with the LC-MS, nine years after the ELS had taken the same action. There can be no denying that the organizers of the LFC hoped this would be a forum to strengthen the former brethren from Missouri. This was not a primary objective, and perhaps that should give some solace to the Conference supporters, for the LFC did little to strengthen Missouri, if tangible results count for anything.

"The LFC had almost no impact on the Missouri Synod," according to Schuetze, who had a very intimate view of the LFC, as chairman of the Arrangements Committee during its entire existence. While the LFC was still meeting, Missouri began to openly

practice altar and pulpit fellowship with the ALC (1969). As noted before, Journalist Paul Eckert suggested the LFC's effect may even have been negative, since some Confessional Missourians were tempted to do their confessing for three days every summer outside of their synod, rather than by fighting the difficult fight facing them all year long within the confines of synod.

In the hoped-for goal of "mutually strengthening" also the seminary leadership of Missouri the LFC had little success. Not that the LFC did not try, but "Barkus was unwilling." To what extent the LC-MS leadership was responsible for this remains an unanswered question.

The observation was previously made that the LFC's most important purpose was to "provide...a forum of mutual strengthening with the ultimate objective to obtain full unity in doctrine and practice." (WLG, 61:207) How did she do? Quite well and not very well.

The forum was definitely there, the strengthening definitely took place, as one can expect whenever God's Word is studied on the terms under which it expects to be studied. The Holy Spirit used the LFC as a vehicle of "mutual strengthening," and that is a laudable event in any body's life.

That "full unity in doctrine and practice" was never attained is evident from the acerbation of the disagreement over Church and Ministry (sessions 3 and 4). It is evident in that at the conclusion of the LFC the theologians and students of God's Word walked away from one another unable to join in prayer or the use of the Sacraments. Granted, the LFC was not organized with

the express purpose of eliminating doctrinal differences, but this was the ultimate purpose, and the LFC never reached the ultimate expressions of fellowship.

Perhaps the most long-lasting effect the LFC will have on Lutheranism in America is the fine series of publications stemming from the Conference essays. Five times the Northwestern Publishing House produced compact distillations of doctrinal concerns facing the Christian Church. Five times the Church gained edification from those efforts.

To a large degree, the Lutheran Free Conference is already forgotten to a new generation, only 15 years after the last gavel sounded. But the Conference still speaks through those publications, and that voice is clear, direct, steady, and definitive. Through This Steadfast Word, His Pardoning Grace, Jesus Christ -- Fact or Fiction?, God, The Holy Spirit, Acts, and The Way to Lutheran Unity, the LFC can still contribute to "mutual strengthening with the ultimate objective to obtain full unity in doctrine and practice."

In analyzing how the LFC fared in meeting its own goals, there is a "mixed bag" to report. Some purposes were fulfilled, other goals were not attained. Always there are some effects "known but to God," and some of the LFC's work falls into that category. Certainly the final criterion of analysis, namely what purpose the LFC served in the Holy Christian Church, fits this latter description.

The final article published by the Wisconsin Lutheran Quar-

terly on the LFC gave this assessment:

To my knowledge, this is the longest series of free conferences that was ever held. Over the years quite a number of people have been reached with the testimony for confessional Lutheranism based on the verbally inspired, inerrant Holy Scriptures. Some came once, others several times. A surprisingly large number attended all or nearly all of the conferences. This includes a healthy proportion of concerned laymen. (WLG 67:293, the author = Schuetze)

So the final question comes down to what fruit these conferences had. Did they effect the Church? "That is not for us to say. But we know that faithful witness to God's Word, to the Gospel in its full truth, will ever be accompanied by the working of the Holy Spirit. The fruits we leave to Him." (Ibid.) With that assessment we are content not only to end this topic, but also to end it with the realization that whatever good, whatever noble, whatever blessed results the LFC had, they were gained only through the gift of God's Word and the Holy Spirit's ability to discern truth through that Word. Sola Dei Gloria!

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Additional Conferences?

A personal note to end this paper. The impetus for this essay came from two directions. 1) An assigned paper that called for detailed study of LFC Session Two's essays on justification, and 2) the following notices in the "News and Comments" section of WLG Volume 80, Number 4:

The ELS resolved [in convention] to launch a new approach to the search for agreement on contemporary issues among Lutherans. The proposal calls for the creation of a "Lutheran Forum for Confessional Consultation (LFCC)," which would function as a communication channel through which confessional Lutheran church bodies could discuss with one another currently important theological issues...The Forum's Corresponding Secretary (Dr. Neelak Tjernagel) will solicit study papers representing synodical positions and circulate them to other bodies for study and reaction...Synod President George Orvick commented that it is highly unlikely that any church groups will merge because of the Forum's work;

that is not its goal. But reaching the goal of a strengthened confession of Scripture truths makes the Forum potentially the most important matter dealt with at this convention. (p 296, Paul H. Wilde, reporting)

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The second resolution [of the LC-MS' Committee on Theology and Church Relations, meeting at Synod convention] that may call for a response from the WELS directs "the President of the Synod during the coming triennium to encourage the convening of Free Lutheran Theological Conferences, for Lutherans of North America and throughout the world." The President, in consultation with the Commission of Theology and Church Relations, is to "prepare suggestions and guidelines for participation in these Free Conferences." The response to such conferences will no doubt be determined by the guidelines. (p 299, A.W. Schuetze reporting)

Shades of 1963!! The WELS might be tempted to reply (at least to Missouri's overture), "Why wouldn't you dance while I played the fiddle?" Shall we have future free conferences? If they are held, should the WELS participate? As Prof. Schuetze noted, the guidelines for such conferences will be very important to us, as they were in 1964ff. There can be no forsaking of fellowship principles while searching for a basis of fellowship.

But the goal is noble. Ecumenicity has a bad ring in our ears, after it has been so grossly abused both in our generation and that of our fathers. However, Christian ecumenicity, in the true sense of the word, i.e. the fellowship of the Holy, Christian (catholic) Church, is a goal for which Jesus prayed and for which we must work. And so we strive on. Shall we participate? Of course! provided we're not asked to forsake part of God's Word to study another part of God's Word.

May God be willing to bless His Church on earth again through this vehicle. Twice in its history the Wisconsin Synod has benefited greatly from studying God's Word in the forum of a free conference.