

# Fellowship: The Demise of the Synodical Conference

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The founding fathers of the Synodical Conference established the Conference on the basis of fellowship. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, agreement on doctrine became the focal point of fellowship for confessional or “Old Lutherans”. The main components of this movement were the Ohio Synod and the Missouri Synod. The man who led this charge was C. F. W. Walther.

Walther saw the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions as the only rule by which fellowship between synods can join together. In a paper presented at Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato, Minnesota at the Reformation Lectures in honor of Dr. C.F.W. Walther at the centenary of his death, Arnold Koelpin said, “For Walther the middle way to union lay in a unity grounded in Scripture and faithful to the Lutheran Confessions.”<sup>1</sup> Walther understood the importance of true fellowship on the word of God and the Lutheran Confessions. But Walther also issued a warning, “Who will want to align himself with a new theology which claims to be a legitimate development of the old Lutheran theology, but departs from it in the doctrine of Scripture, of the ‘*ratio formalis Scripturae*,’ of that which constitutes the essence of Scripture [namely, its inspiration].”<sup>2</sup> Deviating from the doctrines of Scripture is a deviation from the Confessions.

Walther, who held that Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions were the sole rule for fellowship, took issue with the Lutherans who demonstrated their careless attitude against the Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions by joining with other non confessional church bodies. One such synod was the Wisconsin Synod. Early in their history, the Wisconsin Synod joined in pulpit fellowship with

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Koelpin. *Walther And The Synodical Conference*. WLS essay file, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Koelpin 9.

other Christians. In Racine one of the Wisconsin Synod churches allowed a Presbyterian pastor to preach in its pulpit, and if there were any emergencies there would be a note posted on the church door telling parishioners to go and see the pastor across the street. This is an example of what Walther witnessed in this young Synod.

The founding fathers of the Wisconsin Synod made lip service to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions saying that they agreed with them but in practice, they welcomed whoever would come to them and fellowship lines were blurred. They were under the influence of the Mission Societies that were situated in Europe. After the first president, Muehlhaeuser, left office a new president and a new era would begin.

John Bading became the new president of the Wisconsin Synod in 1960. Bading, who once wanted to leave the Wisconsin Synod for the LCMS because of its liberal stance on fellowship, led the charge into confessionalism. With Bading leading the way, the Wisconsin Synod cut their ties with the liberal Mission Societies in Europe, and made a firmer stance on the Lutheran Confession. This time it would not be lip service to them but an actual adherence to them. At first Walther was not convinced of the new position of the Wisconsin Synod. But after meeting with Bading at a colloquy, Walther reported, "All our reservations about... Wisconsin... have been put to shame."<sup>3</sup>

With a new confidence in the Wisconsin Synod the pathway to full fellowship was open between the LCMS and the Wisconsin Synod. As things

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<sup>3</sup>Edward C. Fredrich. *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: A History of the Single Synod, Federation, and Merger*. Milwaukee, WI. Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. 52

with Missouri were healing nicely, the relationship between the Wisconsin Synod and the General Council became sour. Wisconsin break from the General Synod was the last wall between Wisconsin and Missouri. After the break with the General Council, a longing for a true confessional fellowship were on the minds of many synods.

With Scripture and the Confessions as the basis of fellowship, several synods joined to form the Synodical Conference. These synods included the Missouri, Ohio, Norwegian, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and eventually the Michigan. After the Ohio spit from the conference over the election controversy, three of the synods, Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin joined into one Wisconsin Synod. The three primary synods that made up the Synodical Conference were the LCMS (Lutheran Church Missouri Synod), ELS (Evangelical Synod which was part of the original Norwegian Synod), and the WELS (Wisconsin Evangelical Synod).

For almost one hundred years these three Synods worked side by side in the proclamation of the gospel. Unfortunately in the midpoint of the 20<sup>th</sup> century things were about to change. The doctrine of fellowship that brought these synods together was now going to spit up the Synodical Conference.

It is hard to determine the exact moment when the LCMS of the Synodical Conference began to view fellowship in a wider context in their theology. The Common Confession to some marks the event but even before this there were some instances that things were changing in the LCMS.

One such change in the LCMS was its view on the Scouts. It was not long before this that the LCMS's position on the Scouts was that it viewed the Scouts as a religious organization. Because the Scout's doctrines were not confessional and they did follow the Scriptures on all their doctrines, the LCMS refused to join in that organization because to do so would indicate that the LCMS agrees in their doctrinal stance. This was the position held in the Synodical Conference

But after the LCMS issued the Common Confession, their stance on the Scouts also changed. Now the Scouts were seen as a group they could get together with in things like prayer and social events. LCMS received the permission from the Scouts that the local pastor and local church body superseded the authority of the Scout leadership. In response to this development the Synodical Conference asked the Synods to revisit the issue of the Scouts to see if the children of the congregations could attend without blurring fellowship principles.

After revisiting the Scout issue the LCMS reaffirmed that it did not see a problem with Scouting since the Scouts allowed the local pastor to govern the Scouts in his church. "President Behnken described the action of the Missouri members and called it 'cooperation in externals pure and simple.'"<sup>4</sup> The LCMS tried to justify their action by separating the religious ideals of the Scouts from the outward activities that they undertook.

Upon hearing the decision of LCMS, the WELS became disappointed in the stance that LCMS held. From the WELS point of view, the LCMS rejected the

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<sup>4</sup> Armin W. Schuetze. *The Synodical Conference: Ecumenical Endeavor*. Milwaukee, WI. Northwestern Publishing House, 2000. 248.

long standing view of the Synodical Conference that the Scouts were a religious organization and any attempts to join them would violate biblical and confessional fellowship principles. Wisconsin demanded that the Synodical Conference act upon the issues at its next convention.

The Synodical Conference met in 1952 to discuss the issue at hand. A committee made up of mostly LCMS and WELS members met to discuss the Scouting issue. But the obvious thing happened. Each of the members followed the views of their respective Synods. When the time came for a decision to be made by the Synodical Conference, the resolution passed closed the issue of Scouting for the Convention for further study only to be presented at the next Conference. Unfortunately the next Conference convened but each Synod held to their stance on the Scouts and no action was taken by the Synodical Conference.

Another such indicator that something was brewing in the area of fellowship can be seen in the chaplaincy of the United States Armed Forces. In the years before WWII, LCMS and the WELS called their own chaplains to minister to their members who were in the military. But on the eve of WWII Missouri took a look at the government's call for chaplains. The government saw the moral boost the chaplain program could give the troops. In LCMS defense, it wanted a way to help out soldiers who were fighting on their behalf. The LCMS saw no problems with the program when the government told them that it would not make the church go against its regulation. With this in mind, LCMS took the chance that the government would not interfere in matters of church relations.

The WELS on the other hand did not think this move was a wise one. The government has total control of the chaplaincy. Even though the government said it would not interfere there is always a chance that the confessional stance of the church may be ignored by the government. This fear kept the WELS from entering the US chaplain ministry. Instead the WELS did what they had done before. They sent their own chaplains overseas to minister to their soldiers.

The Synodical Conference got involved and asked both the LCMS and the WELS to present their reasons for the Chaplaincy and their reasons against the Chaplaincy. The matter was presented and discussed. The LCMS conclude that a pastor was able to join in the Chaplaincy program because the government allowed for a pastor to minister only to the confirmed communicants of the LCMS. But the WELS and the ELS saw potential problems. What the government promises now may not be what they will allow all the time. Plus there are temptations to minister to other Christians not in fellowship because of trying circumstances. It did not seem wise to put yourself in such a position. After many years of back and forth discussions on this issue the matter fell out of prominence in favor of a more pressing issue, the topic of unionism.

Another instance that marks the changing attitude in LCMS was the Statement of the forty-four. Forty-four men in the LCMS made a statement in 1945 that included a call for joint prayers with other Christians and they criticized the old view of separating from other non-confessional Christians.

Referring back to the Synods resolution of 1938, they affirmed their conviction that church fellowship was possible without complete

agreement in details of doctrine and practice which never been considered divisive in the Lutheran Church.<sup>5</sup>

The forty-four were in favor of a "selective fellowship" that the American Lutheran Church would have no problem adopting.

The Statement of the forty-four caused a stir in the LCMS. President Behnken of the Missouri Synod met with some of the signers to determine why they were led to write such a statement. There was a call from within the Synod for action against the forty-four. But before any action could be taken on this issue the forty-four withdrew their statement. It is important to see that this was a withdrawal and not a retraction of the contents in their statement.

By making a withdrawal, the forty-four did not have to face the consequences of what they wrote. The leaders of the LCMS failed to take action against the issues brought forth by the forty-four. Like most problems when they are not dealt with fester, so too the issues that were brought to light by the forty-four festered. The unionistic ideals were pushed under the mat hoping that the problems would disappear. But that did not happen. Without action, the LCMS started a division between those who held to the long standing of confessional fellowship and between those who wanted to stretch the boundary of fellowship in favor of the emerging ecumenical movement.

The focus of the ecumenical movement was to bring Christians together regardless if there was doctrinal unity. Professor Lawrenz clearly explains the focus of the ecumenical movement in an essay on Scriptural Principles on Fellowship

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<sup>5</sup> Schuetze. 289



This ecumenical movement is making its impact upon Christians denominations through out the world and aims to unite them all in a common fellowship of worship and work, though without any serious thought of reaching doctrinal agreement on the basis of God's word.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of union crept into the LCMS. Some in the LCMS wanted to unite with ALC (The American Lutheran Church). The year 1938 is the year that began the dissolution of the Synodical Conference. It was that year that the ALC at its Sandusky convention declared that it is not necessary to agree on all points of non-fundamental doctrine.<sup>7</sup> Also in that year the LCMS convention resolved that the Brief Statements and the resolution of the ALC convention were basis for future church-fellowship.<sup>8</sup>

Two statements were their basis for future fellowship. The inconsistency of these statements brought criticism from the WELS. In 1939 the WELS issued a response to the development between LCMS and ALC. Two different statements cannot indicate fellowship. WELS encouraged them to make one statement for further discussion.

Out of this request came a joint doctrinal statement from representatives of the LCMS and the LCA. This document was called "Affirmation". It is interesting that both the LCMS and the ALC rejected the document. LCMS rejected it because "it sounded too much like Ohio-Iowa talk (referring back to the election controversy)" and the ALC rejected it because "it was too close to the

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<sup>6</sup> Lyle Lang. (ed). *Our Great Heritage*. 3 vol. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997. 443

<sup>7</sup> Fredrich 199.

<sup>8</sup> Fredrich 199.

Brief Statements”.<sup>9</sup> Since both parties rejected this statement to establish grounds for fellowship, it would be logical that all attempts to unit would have fallen through.

Despite this road block the two parties continued in their pursuit of fellowship. Their next joint doctrinal statement was called “Common Confession”. There was only a minority in LCMS that rejected the new statement. Unlike before the ALC quickly adopted the statement as the correct statement on faith. This quick reaction from ALC gave cause to the other members of the Synodical Conference to be concerned about the Common Confession. Just a few years before the ALC rejected a statement because it was too close to the Brief Statements but now this new statement gave no cause for concern for the ALC. What was different now than it was before?

After reading the Common Confession the ELS and the WELS both agreed that the Common Confession was not clear and concise for a doctrinal document. The ambiguity in the Common Confession made it possible for the liberal Lutheran groups to agree with it. This was not acceptable from a confessional Lutheran point of view. In 1956 this agreement became a sore spot between LCMS and the WELS. The LCMS viewed the Common Confession “as an adequate settlement of past doctrinal disagreements” while the WELS concluded “that a common confession has been achieved only by ignoring real

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<sup>9</sup> Curtis Jahn. (ed) *Essays on Church Fellowship*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996. 224

points of controversy and soft-pedaling important doctrinal positions of the Synodical Conference.”<sup>10</sup>

The Common Confession was an attempt to unit with another Lutheran body by stating obvious fundamental doctrines but ignoring the controversial doctrines. By doing this all parties would be able to agree with the statement and common ground could be gathered for the basis of fellowship. What the Common Confession tried to do is similar to the unity that Melanchthon and the Crypto-Calvinist tried to do after Luther’s death. For the sake of outward unity and peace, Melanchthon and Crypto-Calvinist wrote in such a way that all could agree. Ambiguity is no way to establish fellowship whether it was back in Melanchthon’s day or in the days of the ecumenical movement. Outward unity should not supersede true inward unity on the basis of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

Despite the movement forward between Missouri and ALC, the WELS and ELS demonstrated patience in dealing with the older Synod. Both Synods wanted to do their best to keep the confessional fellowship that they all enjoyed with the Synod that was instrumental in the beginning the confessional stance of the Synodical Conference back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Both the ELS and the WELS engaged in an In Statu Confessionis (A state of confession). The ELS was fist in the State of Confession. By doing this the ELS expressed how dangerous they viewed the Common Confession. WELS joined in the State of Confession to show the LCMS that this Common

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<sup>10</sup> Fredrich pg 200

Confession was not doctrinally sound and that there could be a danger in following the road that they were heading down.

Why bother with all of this warning and having a State of Confession? Why not just break fellowship? These are appropriate questions that were asked through out this process. To some it was obvious what was going on. The LCMS wanted to become part of the ecumenical movement. But like church discipline, breaking fellowship with a synod that on paper are confessional and the history of the synod is one of confessionalism, patience and love should be the motivation between the synods involved in the hope that they recognize the error of their way. The State of Confession that the ELS and the WELS issued was a loving way to show the LCMS that what they were doing had serious repercussions if they continued. The hope in doing this would be that the LCMS would see that they were falling away from the confessional stance that the Synodical Conference was formed. There was a hope that they would realize the foolishness of what they were doing and return to the position that not only the Synodical Conference was founded on but also what their beloved Synod held on by their founder, Walther.

This is an interesting turn of events. At the beginning of the Wisconsin Synod, it had a lax view on fellowship that Walther criticized. But during the controversy in the 1950's it was the LCMS that was breaking down the confessional fellowship that Walther held so dear. It was up to the ELS and the WELS to bring this to light in the Synodical Conference. They had to point out to their erring brothers that they were in danger of causing a break in fellowship.

The LCMS did not change its stand which led the ELS to be the first to declare that they would no longer be in fellowship with the Missouri Synod. Despite breaking fellowship with Missouri the ELS remained in the Synodical Conference. The WELS wanted to exhaust every effort to keep the unity. But as time went on, there were those in the WELS who wanted the Synod to take action. After many times of tabling or taking no action, a group within the WELS broke fellowship to form the CLC (the Church of the Lutheran Confession). Even to this day, the CLC will not join with the WELS until the WELS admits that they were wrong in waiting so long to break fellowship with the LCMS.

Ralph Gehrke points out the need to understand the term “fellowship” in order to understand the problems between erupting in the Synodical Conference. In an essay delivered to Wisconsin Lutheran College in 1958 Gehrke states

As for our own synod, and its discussions with the Missouri Synod is concerned, I, for one am convinced that the final results as to our future course with her depend on the view which we have of Church Fellowship more than on the present discussion of the issues themselves; for unless we are clear in our own midst on what we really mean with such phrases as “breaking, or suspending or even terminating relations” in connection with church fellowship, if we are not clear on the frame of reference in which we use such phrases nothing but confusion can result in our own midst and in our congregations all over from any resolutions we make or do not make.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to keep in mind what each side is talking about or there is a chance that the two sides would end up talking past each other and nothing gets settled.

Keeping the meaning of “fellowship” clear in meaning was the driving force behind the Synodical Conference call for its members to address the issue of

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<sup>11</sup> Ralph Gehrke. *Church Fellowship*. Northwestern College, Watertown, July 15, 1958. 1.

“fellowship”. Each synod was to prepare a statement on fellowship for discussion. The ELS viewed fellowship as “the outward expression of an inner unity of faith.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly the WELS viewed fellowship as “a joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.”<sup>13</sup> Both Synods look to confession for the basis of unity. Why? No mere human can read another human’s heart. God knows what is in a man’s heart but mankind has to hear the confession of another to find out where his heart lies. But what should be done with hypocrites? Nothing, since no one knows who they are. They will have to contend with the Almighty God.

ELS and WELS both look to the confession of others to determine if there is an agreement in doctrine which is based on the Scriptures. But LCMS made a distinction that would allow them to keep the meaning set down by ELS and WELS but also keep an agreement with other believers. The LCMS concluded in the Preamble to their position on fellowship that

The biblical concept of fellowship centers in the Triune God and emphasizes the fact that spiritual fellowship consists fundamentally in communion with God. From this communion with God there is derived that unique Christian fellowship among men which is expressed in all areas of their life and activity. Pulpit and altar fellowship is a very important aspect or facet of this fellowship but cannot be simply equated with it. Pulpit and altar fellowship, and the related problems of prayer fellowship and unionism, can be properly understood and evaluated only within the larger framework of Christian fellowship in general.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Four Statements on Fellowship*: Presented by the Constituent Synods of the Synodical Conference. St. Louis, MO. Concordia Publishing House, 1960. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Four Statements on Fellowship*. 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Four Statements on Fellowship*. 16.

The LCMS tried to skirt the issue by claiming that there are different kinds of fellowship. But by doing this, they are going against one of the founding fathers of the Synodical Conference, their own C.F.W. Walther.

The LCMS included prayer fellowship in with the universal fellowship of the Holy Christian Church.

Christian fellowship is in its very nature not static but dynamic, outreaching, self-extending, in principle as universal as the Lordship of Christ. Therefore the matter of joint prayer between Christians not in the same confessional-organizational fellowship cannot be determined by a flat universal rule. It would be an oversimplification to say that any one of the manifestations of fellowship, such as joint prayer, always necessarily presupposes and involves every other manifestation, such as pulpit and altar fellowship.<sup>15</sup>

This idea of prayer fellowship from the LCMS departed from the long standing principles that the Synodical Conference held. At a free conference in 1904 in Detroit, there was a motion made that free conferences should be opened and closed with joint prayer. The members of the Synodical Conference present presented four reasons to refrain from joint prayer.

(1) Surely every participant prays private. (2) Public joint prayer was evidence and practice of church fellowship. (3) The false impression would be given that all the participants were one in spirit and faith. (4) The existing doctrinal differences were of no particular significance.<sup>16</sup>

LCMS no longer held to this confession of the Synodical Conference.

The ELS broke fellowship with Missouri in 1955. The WELS pleaded for the LCMS to make a clear cut statement of fellowship, but no such effort came about. So after years and years of frustration in dealing with the unionistic

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<sup>15</sup> *Four Statements on Fellowship.* 43 44

<sup>16</sup> Schuetze. 184.

tendencies of the LCMS toward the Chaplaincy program, the Scouts, and the Common Confession with the ALC, WELS finally broke fellowship ties with LCMS in 1961.

In its zeal to broaden fellowship with others, the LCMS broke the bonds of confessional fellowship it enjoyed in the Synodical Conference. The only thing left for the ELS and the WELS was to officially withdraw from the Synodical Conference. This happened in 1963 at the first convention after the WELS broke fellowship with the LCMS. After the ELS and WELS left the Synodical Conference, it consisted of the LCMS and the small Slovak Synod. In 1967 the LCMS and the Slovak Synod dissolved the Synodical Conference and the Slovak Synod incorporated itself into the LCMS.

Fellowship issues helped form the Synodical Conference but fellowship issues also became the downfall of the Synodical Conference. Not that fellowship principles were bad in and of themselves but it was the misuse of the fellowship principles that were bad. LCMS in its hope to unite with others not in confessional agreement were willing to bend fellowship principles. But by doing this, they broke the fellowship principles of those who stood beside them in one confession for almost one hundred years.

A warning comes out of the break up of the Synodical Conference. The warning that all confessional church bodies should see from the demise of the Synodical Conference can be seen in the LCMS. The LCMS was once the leader of confessionalism for many years, yet their stance on confessionalism fell in favor of unionism. For confessional church bodies, this is a similar warning that



St. Paul gives in 1 Corinthians chapter ten, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"

Despite the sad outcome the Synodical Conference, there were some good things that happened. Out of the ashes of the broken Synodical Conference came a stronger bond of fellowship between the ELS and the WELS. Another good thing to come out of this was a stronger and more precise definition of fellowship based on God's Word. By 1993, the ELS and the WELS would join in a world wide confessional fellowship that made up the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference, a fellowship enjoyed to this day.

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