

A Few, Faithful in Few Things: Our Synod's Fathers and the Formation of the Synodical Conference

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[This essay was written in 1972, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Synodical Conference.]

On July 10–16, 1872, the constituent convention of the now defunct Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America was held in Milwaukee at St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church with the Illinois, Missouri, Norwegian, Ohio, Minnesota, and Wisconsin Synods participating. It is the purpose of this centennial article to trace the pathways on which the latter two synods were led into the federation that would be a standard-bearer of confessional Lutheranism in our land and the world from 1872 on for almost a century.

The total commitment to the Lutheran Confessions, to the doctrines of Scripture, and to its fellowship principles that motivated and guided the founders of the Synodical Conference has been discussed in a January 1972 *Quarterly* essay and need not be described in detail here.ⁱ Rather, it will be our concern to note how the commitment of our synod's fathers influenced what they did in the matter of the formation of the Synodical Conference.

The reader will, of course, be aware that the men of both the Minnesota Synod and the Wisconsin Synod are included in the term, "our synod's fathers." He will likewise realize that the designation, "Wisconsin Synod," which now includes Minnesota, must in the 1870's be limited to the church body within the state named. The other two bodies that became components of our synod, Michigan and Nebraska, do not come into consideration in this article. Both were not in a position to be involved in the formation of the Synodical Conference, Michigan because it retained membership in the General Council until 1888, and Nebraska because the Lutheran pioneers there would not shake off for a generation the aversion to larger ecclesiastical organizations that they brought with them to their new home.

It was inevitable that the larger synods of Missouri and Ohio should take the leadership in the founding of the Synodical Conference. The Ohio Synod in 1870, at the request of its Eastern District, appointed a committee of five, including President Loy, to correspond with Missouri and other confessional synods about the possibilities of forming a larger federation that would be more satisfactory than the General Council. Dr. Walther and the Missouri Synod could, of course, be expected to direct doctrinal considerations. The Norwegian Synod, which like Ohio and Missouri had refrained from joining the General Council, was also in a better position to react to the proposal for a new formation than were Illinois, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, who in 1870 were either still in or only recently out of the General Council.

In 1872 our synod's fathers were a small band. The Wisconsin roll had 59 names.ⁱⁱ The count in Minnesota was 25.ⁱⁱⁱ In contrast, Missouri, celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1872, already had 415 pastors and professors as the largest of the Synodical Conference synods.^{iv} But among the few there was an awareness of the responsibilities and the opportunities that lay before them. In their *Gemeinde-Blatt* the editorialist "E," Dr. A. Ernst, replied to the charge that the proposed conference gave too much voting power to small synods:

The Synodical Conference, however, is not to be ruled by vote counts but by God's Word and thus it is not a question of who has the most votes but who is the most faithful interpreter of God's Word, for with it all devout hearts must agree. And just because God's Word rules, the minority must have significant rights, for it could well be in possession of the truth, the others not.^v

The fathers took this point seriously. The record indicates that there is no justification for the charges raised a century ago that Missouri alone was setting the pace and that the other synods, large and small, were

simply following her lead. *Lehre und Wehre* is quick to reject the *Lutheran and Missionary* claim that Missouri's sister synods were "surrendering to strangers their own schools and heritage while entering a union in which the disciples of Martin Stephan are going to read the text."^{vi} On the contrary, our synod's fathers faithfully applied the Scriptural, confessional, and fellowship principles they espoused as they acted and reacted in the developments leading to the formation of the Synodical Conference. Certain of their procedures are worth noting, appreciating, and emulating one hundred years later in 1972.

I. Brother-to-Brother Dealings on the Grassroots Level

In our time ecumenical encounters and endeavors are all too frequently characterized by top-level discussions and fiats handed down from above. Ivory towers are busily engaged, but ivory towers do not necessarily reach up to where the Holy Spirit dwells or down to where the desired unity is to be lived. When that Holy Spirit had made all things ready for the founding and forming of the Synodical Conference, our fathers under His direction went to work with a will, not from the top down, but from the bottom up. This is especially apparent in the matter of improving relations between Missouri and Wisconsin.

Without such improved Missouri-Wisconsin relations membership for Wisconsin and Missouri in the same larger church organization would have been unthinkable. As the vigorous Missouri Synod began to spread and to reach into Wisconsin, it was inevitable that its path would cross that of the younger, smaller, and less confessional Wisconsin body. Unionistic tendencies on the part of a synod that called itself Lutheran irritated the orthodox Missourians. Clashes occurred in areas where both synods had congregations. After Wisconsin established its *Gemeinde-Blatt* in 1865, verbal battles were fought with the columns of Missouri's *Lutheraner* and *Lehre und Wehre*.^{vii} However, by the end of the 1860's both Wisconsin's confessionalism and its Missouri relations were on the mend.

At the 1868 Racine convention President Bading could include in his official report the heartening declaration that an "opportune private discussion with pastors of the Missouri Synod, who desire peace as earnestly with us as we with them, justifies the hope that also our relations to that church body will become more and more friendly and brotherly."^{viii} Koehler reports that these discussions were a result of friendly contacts between his father, who was pastor at Hustisford, and a Missouri neighbor, Pastor Multanowski of Town Hubbard, as well as between Missouri pastors in the Watertown area and Bading, Hoenecke, and Meumann.^{ix}

However, the Racine convention was also confronted by a typical Missouri-Wisconsin clash on the parish level. At Waterford were two congregations, one served by the Missourian Dehnke and a Wisconsin congregation shepherded by Pastor Titze of Burlington. Pastor Dehnke was trying to get the Wisconsin people to join his Waterford congregation and, it seems, was threatening to establish a Burlington opposition church, if the Waterford situation did not develop according to his wishes. The Racine synod heard a "thorough" presentation of the facts in the case and held a lengthy discussion and then acted in a straightforward manner. Its Waterford people were urged to resist the merger effort for the time being and it was resolved to protest to Missouri if an investigation of the case revealed that Pastor Dehnke was actually indulging in activities that were not according to the Bible and Lutheran practice.^x Efforts were made to deal with a bad situation in a brotherly way.

At the same time, the parish problem was not permitted to discourage the Wisconsin men at Racine from taking up in a positive and decisive way President Bading's suggestion of the possibility of better things to come in the field of Missouri relations. Two resolutions were passed. One instructed President Bading to take the "proper steps to bring about peace so that there might be mutual recognition as Lutheran synods and brotherly relations between members of both synods in the spirit of truth on the basis of pure doctrine." The basis for this enabling resolution was established when the convention declared that in the area of Missouri-Wisconsin relations it had no knowledge of any "church divisive differences" and that conflicts involved "practical questions, aggressions of individual members of both synods and articles in public periodicals, which often expressed more the tone of strife and scorn than sincere regret over such evils and loving correction."

There were objections to the phrase, “church divisive differences,” which was actually a floor substitute for the committee’s original “difference in doctrine.” As the minutes show, Professor Hoenecke and Pastor Lange formally protested this variation on the old Iowa theme of “open questions.” A pastor, selected to serve on the committee that was to deal with Missouri in the matter, expressed doubts about his ability to function if the unsatisfactory relations with the General Council were not rectified. In so far as the heart of the matter was concerned, however, there was willingness and determination on the part of synod members to do all in their power to live with Missouri in a God-pleasing peace both in spite of and because of practical parochial problems.

Thus it was that Missouri’s Northern District, at its meeting in Milwaukee that opened the day the Racine convention closed, considered the proposal that had come from the Wisconsin neighbors asking that “representatives of both synods at a meeting to be held within the next months discuss current differences for the purpose of resolving them and regulating relations between the synods in the future.”^{xi} Without any loss of time and waiting on protocol, Wisconsin made an immediate and direct appeal to the neighbors and brothers directly concerned for a resolution of differences. The direct approach and fraternal appeal had good results.

The Northern District of the Missouri Synod was somewhat disturbed that the Wisconsin overture implied that there could have been errors on the Missouri side. It was deeply concerned that discussion should center on doctrine and bring about a clear and public repudiation of unionism. It modified a previous charge made about the celebration of Holy Communion in the congregations of the Wisconsin Synod. However, there was general rejoicing that the Wisconsin overture had been submitted and agreement that discussions should be held. Upon the suggestion of President Walther, who was present, the committee was to be viewed as one acting for, not just the Northern District, but the whole Missouri Synod.

The Wisconsin-Missouri colloquy took place October 21 and 22, 1868, in Milwaukee with formal sessions held at the home of the Eissfeldt brothers and the social gathering on the last evening hosted by Mr. Kuetemeyer, as President Bading relates in his golden jubilee history of St. John’s Congregation.^{xii} President Walther, Professor Brauer, Pastors Lochner, Sievers, and Strassen for Missouri and President Bading, Professor Hoenecke, Pastors Dammann, Gausewitz, and Koehler for Wisconsin found themselves in full agreement when they discussed “open questions” and other points of doctrine and controversial issues. Professor Walther summed up the discussions when he reported, “We must admit that all our reservations about the honored Wisconsin Synod not only have vanished but have been put to shame. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.”^{xiii}

When the declaration of unity was ratified at subsequent synodical conventions, by Wisconsin at Helenville in May 1869 and by Missouri at Fort Wayne in September 1869, along with plans for joint educational endeavors, fellowship between Missouri and Wisconsin was fully in effect. What had begun as fraternal encounters at Hustisford, Lebanon, and Watertown and had been conducted on a brother-to-brother, neighbor-to-neighbor basis grew into a fellowship between two synods, who could now work together in the formation of a larger grouping of church bodies.

A very similar situation prevailed across the Mississippi. The Minnesota Synod, which by 1871 was in fellowship with Wisconsin, could only enter the Synodical Conference by first establishing fraternal relations with the Missouri and Norwegian men who shared the area of labor. Strained relations with Missouri reached back into the early 1860’s when several families founded Missouri’s Zion Church, breaking away from Trinity, the Minnesota Synod’s original Twin City congregation, just after Pastor Heyer resigned and Pastor Fachtman filled the vacancy. These families charged Trinity with laxity in Lutheran doctrine and practice.^{xiv} For the next decade in various areas Missouri men spoke out against the practices of pastors who belonged to a synod that, according to Missouri standards, was much too lax to be regarded as truly Lutheran.

Early in 1871 efforts on the congregational level were made to improve the situation. Joint meetings of Trinity and Zion were arranged, but overlapping parochial interests prevented the two neighbors from composing all their difficulties. However, in January 1872 both the *Gemeinde-Blatt* and the *Lutheraner* carried the announcement:

At the request of the pastors of the Minnesota Synod and the honorable Missouri Synod a mixed conference will be held in St. Paul, Minn., in the congregation of Pastor J.H. Sieker, beginning on Jan. 10, 1872, to which hereby all concerned persons are cordially and urgently invited....The main subject under discussion will be the question: How should congregations and pastors of two confessionally faithful synods in one and the same field of labor deal with one another according to God's Word?^{xv}

The *Gemeinde-Blatt* report of the conference, submitted by "S," obviously Sieker, mentions the attendance of several Norwegian pastors and stresses the unity that prevailed when Pastor Herzer's theses on the theme question were discussed.^{xvi}

The eight theses were introduced by three presuppositions: the duty of orthodox Lutheran bodies to recognize orthodox brethren and to promote unity with them, the awareness that such unity will lead to joint work when the brethren are in the same area, and the special implications for pastors according to Acts 20:28 and I Peter 4:15. The theses themselves might be summarized as follows:

1. Fellowship of faith will lead to altar and pulpit fellowship, especially at pastoral conferences and synod meetings;
2. Pastors are not to serve members of a brother's congregation or those excommunicated by it, unless the brother consents;
3. If possible, congregational boundaries should be located and then respected; if no such boundaries exist, then membership rolls and even communion guest lists should be respected;
4. New congregations should not be established in the field that a sister congregation is working;
5. A sister congregation's discipline and excommunication are to be respected;
6. Proper releases should be issued and respected;
7. No call should be accepted to a congregation that has without just cause deposed its pastor;
8. When one brother observes another brother's official or personal error, he should take this up with the erring brother privately; the matter should be taken to the synodical level only if it cannot be disposed of in brother-to-brother confrontation.^{xvii}

These eight theses were destined to play an even larger role in the history of the formation of the Synodical Conference. When the Missouri Synod's colloquy team, Pastors Brauer and Fick, and laymen Brandhorst and Helmke, arrived at the 1872 Mankato convention of the Minnesota Synod after a leisurely boat trip upriver which gave time for a perusal of Minnesota Proceedings, they stated that what they had so far learned made them willing to regard an acceptance of the eight theses as full proof of Minnesota orthodoxy. They would then dispense with a formal doctrinal colloquy.^{xviii} After devoting four morning sessions to a discussion of the eight theses in somewhat different arrangement but with the content intact, the Minnesota Synod made them its own.^{xix}

Meantime, a second "Peace Conference" was held in St. Paul, this time at Pastor Rolf's Zion Church, March 5-7, at which the Ministry of the Keys was the discussion topic, with special emphasis on the *Loeseschluessel*. Certain of the theses under discussion were taken from the 1860 Missouri *Proceedings*. A third conference was planned for July with theses on three subjects: relation of the redemption of the sinner to his justification, preaching of law and gospel to effect true conversion, and church discipline.^{xx} However, no reports on this proposed third conference are to be found. It may have given way to the constituent Synodical Conference convention held that July, which incidentally also had on its agenda the doctrine of justification.

In any event, by that time brotherly and neighborly conferences of Minnesota, Missouri, and Norwegian pastors had served their purpose. The unity that prevailed at the conferences could serve as a stepping stone to the unity that brought about the Synodical Conference.

II. Consistent Concern for Truth and True Fellowship

Another commendable characteristic demonstrated by our synod's fathers along the pathways on which they were led into the Synodical Conference was a deep and abiding concern for the truth and for a true fellowship, a willingness to testify to that end in season and out of season regardless of the cost. This concern manifested itself already then when the time came to break off the old ties that had been in existence before the fellowship of the Synodical Conference.

The Wisconsin Synod was among those synods that in 1866–1867 banded together to form the General Council. Several synods of the General Synod, among them Minnesota, were disturbed by the decline of confessionalism in that body. Under the leadership of the Pennsylvania Ministerium they joined forces with several independent synods, among them Wisconsin, in a new federation that was to be truly Lutheran in doctrine and practice. When the test came, however, in the shape of the Ohio Synod's "Four Points," questions regarding altar fellowship, pulpit fellowship, lodge membership, and chiliasm, the General Council was found wanting already at the first convention in 1867.

A majority in the Council was unwilling to take decisive action on the "Four Points," fearing that a confessional stand would disturb and perhaps destroy the fledgling organization. Only a few spoke up for decisive and confessional action, the Iowa delegation, Pastor Welden of the Pennsylvania Ministerium, President Heyer of Minnesota, and the Wisconsin men. The latter formally protested the Council's wavering and declared they must report unfavorably to the next convention of their body.^{xxi} That convention declared that it must have a better statement on the "Four Points" from the next Council convention or it would have to withdraw. The 1868 Pittsburgh meeting of the General Council did not produce the desired statement. President Bading joined with Pastor Adelberg of New York and Pastor Klingman of Michigan in submitting a minority report that was not accepted.^{xxii} In his next year's presidential report to the convention, Bading reported the unsatisfactory outcome at Pittsburgh and the convention firmly resolved to put its 1868 withdrawal resolution into effect.^{xxiii} It thus became the first of the General Council bodies to withdraw for confessional reasons.

The Minnesota Synod, which was not represented at Pittsburgh, remained in the General Council and it was now its turn to carry on the battle for an adequate "Four Point" declaration. If there were those in confessional circles that disapproved of Minnesota's continuing Council membership until 1871, there were also others who admired this synod, one of the youngest and smallest Lutheran synods in the Council and in the country, for its serious and strenuous fight for confessionalism within the Council. When it finally was forced to withdraw, Minnesota handed on the role of Council conscience to Michigan, but that is another story.

Meeting in June 1869 shortly after Wisconsin's withdrawal from the Council, the Minnesota Synod instructed President Sieker to represent it at the next General Council convention as a synod "faithful to the confessions" and to work to the end that the Council's "position regarding the confessions become ever clearer and more definite."^{xxiv} As a practical way of carrying out this broad mandate, President Sieker determined to direct to the General Council two pointed questions that would test the very general fellowship declarations that the Council had previously issued. In the final form in which they were discussed, the questions read:

Whereas, the testimony of the General Council concerning the Four Points has been differently interpreted...within the General Council; unity in important questions must, however, be regarded as necessary to mutual co-operation, the Evangelical Lutheran Minnesota Synod begs leave to ask whether the right interpretation of the testimony in question is this, to wit:

"1. That heretics and fundamental errorists cannot be admitted to our altars as communicants, nor into our pulpits as teachers of our congregations?"

"2. Since the so-called distinctive doctrines, by which doctrinal opposition [*Lehrgegensatz*] between the Lutheran Church and other denominations is expressed, *are fundamental*, whether the General Council...understood by 'fundamental errorists' those who, with regard to these distinctive doctrines, are not in harmony with the pure doctrine of the Word of God, as it is confessed and taught in our Church?"^{xxv}

The 1869 General Council convention first debated at length whether these were questions of a private person or of the Minnesota Synod and then when time ran out, tabled the matter until the next annual assembly.^{xxvi} Before that assembly could be held, the Minnesota Synod made the disputed questions its own by formal resolution, voiced a protest against the parliamentary practices of the General Council, and served notice that it could only remain in the Council so long as its membership was in harmony “with the conscience of true Lutheran Christians.”^{xxvii}

At Lancaster in 1870 after a three-day debate over the distinction between “fundamental errorists” and what many assumed this meant, “those who err in fundamental doctrines,” the General Council replied to Minnesota, “In employing the terms ‘fundamental errorists’ in the declaration made at Pittsburgh, it understands, not those who are victims of involuntary mistake, but those who willfully, wickedly, and persistently desert, in whole or in part the Christian faith...”^{xxviii} What that amounted to was making room at Lutheran altars for errorists, if the erring was a matter of weakness and not of persistence.

President Sieker, who represented Minnesota at Lancaster, was not satisfied by the answer itself. However, in the course of the debate, he pressed for a clarification of the Council’s position regarding altar fellowship with weak errorists. Doctor Krauth in the chair, in words that would in several years and in final written form become the “Akron Rule,” replied: “Among us it could only be exceptional cases. Rule in the Lutheran Church is that Lutheran altars are only for Lutheran Christians and Lutheran pulpits only for orthodox Lutheran preachers. Only in very rare cases may an exception be declared which then would have to be left to the conscientious judgment of the individual faithful pastors and congregations.”^{xxix} Sieker reluctantly accepted the answer with the Krauth explanation, as did the Illinois and Michigan Synods. He labors to justify that acceptance in a *Gemeinde-Blatt* report of two and one-half columns which has eight “editor’s comments” attached.^{xxx}

Soon President Sieker had his eyes opened by articles being written in the East on the debated point. He realized that more was needed to check the theory and practice of unionism in the Council than a presiding officer’s remark, even if that officer was Doctor Krauth. By the time of the 1871 Minnesota convention President Sieker had publicly withdrawn his acceptance of the Lancaster answer in the pages of the *Lutherische Zeitung*. At the convention he led his synod in declaring for the fellowship principle that in the case of those who err in weakness, as well as in the case of persistent errorists, the error held is a barrier to church fellowship and that the stance of the person to the error will only then be a matter of concern when that person has already come under the pastoral care of the orthodox body. In this connection it was correctly pointed out that this principle must stand because almost all separated from the Lutheran Church could be included among those who “err in weakness.” The final result was that all ties with the General Council were formally severed.^{xxxi}

Immediately after the 1871 Minnesota convention President Sieker reported in Pastor Brobst’s *Lutherische Zeitschrift*: “The Minnesota Synod withdraws from the General Council because the latter is not willing to carry out over against errorists the correct and Scripturally required application of its confession and thereby makes it a dead letter in this respect.”^{xxxii} This declaration is introduced by the quotation from the Confessions: “To dissent from the agreement of so many nations and to be called schismatic is a grave matter. But divine authority commands...”^{xxxiii}

Concern that the truth of God’s Word might rule in all matters was not only manifested by our synod’s fathers in their relations to the General Council but also in their relations with one another and with other prospective Synodical Conference members. Cases in point are actions taken by the Wisconsin Synod concerning Minnesota and Illinois. The interest manifested was that the fellowship, as a whole and in all its parts, be one of truth and purity.

As early as 1863 at the request of “Father” Heyer, who only three years before had drawn a synod of six pastors together, friendly relations were established between the neighboring Wisconsin and Minnesota Synods. Whenever possible, there were delegate exchanges at the annual conventions. In one such instance, Professor Hoenecke was pressed into service by the Minnesota Synod to serve with Professor S. Fritschel of Iowa on the committee to examine candidates applying for membership.^{xxxiv} Wisconsin’s energetic but erratic missionary,

G. Fachtmann, was called to Trinity of St. Paul. Minnesota students could make use of the Watertown school for which Pastor Heyer sought to raise funds in the east. By 1868 the Minnesota Synod was requesting closer ties and Wisconsin reacted favorably. In 1869 doctrinal commissions met, with President Bading and Professor Hoenecke representing Wisconsin and President Sieker and Pastors Emmel, Kuhn, and Reitz representing Minnesota. The findings were that doctrinal unity existed between the synods.^{xxxv} The Wisconsin men were willing to view Minnesota's continuing membership in the General Council, from which Wisconsin had by now withdrawn, as a protesting membership proper in the circumstances.

However, Minnesota's Council membership proved to be a matter of deep concern, so far as the whole Wisconsin Synod was concerned. The 1870 convention, acting on the report of the colloquy with Minnesota and the Minnesota request for closer relations, felt constrained to resolve: "The synod, not being on the basis of the reports in a position to arrive at clarity in the matter of a closer relationship between both synods, is until further developments to remain in the relationship with the honorable Synod of Minnesota that has previously existed."^{xxxvi} The secretary refers to a "rather thorough and also interesting discussion" of the committee report which did not follow through on the Bading-Hoenecke proposal, originally made to Minnesota, for closer ties with that body. The committee's stated reasons were lack of time to discuss all possible ramifications, the necessity of obtaining the prior consent of a majority of the congregations of both synods, and finally the desirability of getting better acquainted before becoming more closely united. Although expressing general approval of the declaration of doctrinal unity and favoring continued use of Watertown by Minnesota students, the committee was able to induce the convention to refrain from any enlargement of existing ties.^{xxxvii} The convention also did not pass a formal recognition of Minnesota's orthodoxy.

The *Proceedings* do not discuss the synod's motivation in its vote beyond supplying the committee's argumentation, but more was involved than that. President Sieker of Minnesota, who was present, in his report to his own synod declared that the reason for the rejection of an enlarged fellowship was concern over Minnesota's continuing membership in the General Council. He specifically mentioned the conscience scruples of three Wisconsin pastors who feared that closer ties at this time with the Minnesota Synod would blunt and contradict Wisconsin's recent withdrawal from the Council for confessional reasons.^{xxxviii}

Assuming that this was the motive for rejecting closer ties with Minnesota, and there is no reason to assume otherwise in the face of President Sieker's first-hand account, one realizes how carefully the fathers were proceeding in the matter of fellowship. Some might argue that Wisconsin in this instance was guilty of bad judgment, at least of leaning over backwards too far. They could summon President Bading and Professor Hoenecke as expert witnesses on their side, for the two colloquents had proposed larger fellowship with Minnesota and vouched for its orthodoxy. President Sieker hints at a Wisconsin Synod inconsistency when he points to its unanimous approval and ratification of all official actions of President Bading, which included Bading's unqualified recognition of Minnesota's orthodoxy at the La Crosse colloquy, and its unwillingness even to pass a formal motion publicly recognizing that orthodoxy.^{xxxix} There were two viewpoints on the question of the propriety of a protesting membership in the General Council for Minnesota in 1870.

Be that as it may, the best construction that could be put on the stand the Wisconsin men took towards their neighbors to the west in 1870, and that is the construction that should be put, is that they were concerned about Bible principles of fellowship and wanted above all to be guided by them. If they were going to err, they wanted to err on the safe, the confessional side. Although they caused their neighbors some grief by what they did, they also strengthened their hands and hearts for the decisive action that would soon be taken. And if the closer ties were not established in 1870, they did come into the picture in 1871, in 1872, in 1892, and in 1917.

The concern of the fathers for the truth and for a true fellowship is likewise apparent in their stance toward the Illinois Synod, another of the original members of the Synodical Conference. At its 1872 convention Wisconsin resolved after lengthy debate to instruct its delegation to the July constituent Synodical Conference convention, President Bading, Professors Ernst and Hoenecke and laymen Geiger, Kusel, and Nagel, to obtain more exact information about the confessional position and practice of the Illinois Synod and, "provided they are satisfied by the declaration of the delegates of that synod, to give their hearty approval to its admission to the Synodical Conference."^{xl}

The resolution might be deemed ill-timed, for this was just six weeks before the Synodical Conference would be called into being, or overly officious, for it could be assumed that the immediate neighbors of the Illinois men, the Missourians, would be taking care of the situation. Speculating on the reasons for this unexpected resolution, Koehler writes: “A plausible explanation is that the 1858–60 dealings with the heterogeneous Illinois bodies regarding the Illinois State University were recalled and that the original sponsors of straight confessionalism in the Wisconsin Synod stood behind the recommendation.”^{xli}

The Koehler conclusion that confessionalism prompted the Illinois resolution is sound, even though one might suggest that he overemphasizes the role played by recollections going back a dozen years regarding a school that had already closed up shop at the original stand, its property going to the Missouri Synod as a site for a practical seminary and its function to Carthage College. The fathers had more to go on than that. Doctor S. L. Harkey represented the Illinois Synod at the General Council meeting in 1868, sat with Hoenecke on the twelve-man committee that dealt with the “Four Points” question, but did not join in the protest against the Council’s irresolute answer. The record of the continuous struggle inside the General Council reveals no evidence of strong support for confessionalism from Illinois.

Furthermore, the Missouri Synod in 1869 felt compelled to reject an appeal for Illinois fellowship and gave as its reason that “up to the present hour the most questionable circumstances in doctrine as well as practice prevail.”^{xlii} Even as late as the spring of 1872, a month before Wisconsin passed its Illinois resolution, another Missouri convention, extending the hand of fellowship to Illinois, still stated that this was being done “in spite of all still existing weakness and shortcoming in its congregations and in individual pastors.”^{xliii}

The intention is not to berate the synod involved but rather to point out that there was reason for Wisconsin to be concerned about fellowship with Illinois and also to commend the concern. It might have been easier for the fathers to ask, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” or to say, “Let George from Missouri do it!” but a heartfelt desire for true fellowship prompted them to take the step they did. They wanted all to be well with Wisconsin, Illinois, and the Synodical Conference. The six Wisconsin men at the first Synodical Conference convention were, we can be sure, as happy as anyone when their concerns were proved to be unnecessary and the truly Lutheran Illinois Synod took its place among the charter members of the Conference.

III. For the Cause’s Sake Willing to Yield Policy and Personalities

Unfortunately major and minor church endeavors today and yesterday are marked and marred by a tendency on the part of groups and individuals to demonstrate an inordinate insistence on mere matters of policy, privilege, personality. It is a pleasure to be able to commend our synod’s fathers for exhibiting some measure of the opposite virtue in their involvement in the formation of the Synodical Conference. On more than a few occasions the record of that involvement demonstrates an accommodating spirit in matters of protocol and policy, a willingness to take back and go back when wrong, a yielding in manner that accompanied a firmness in matter. Specific instances are to be found in that part of the record that has already been sketched. They can simply be recalled and assembled without any elaborate and repetitious narrative.

For Wisconsin and Minnesota, as well as Illinois, membership in the Synodical Conference could only follow upon a withdrawal from the General Council. In the prevailing circumstances withdrawal had to be hasty, for Minnesota after four years and for Wisconsin after two years. The temptation was no doubt great to stay in the Council simply because one had joined the Council. The temptation was no doubt even greater to prolong the membership to avoid the charge of not only being wrong but being wrong in great haste. This point must have weighed heavily with Minnesota, which was in the unenviable position of belonging to three different organizations, the General Synod, the General Council, and the Synodical Conference, within six years. However, Minnesota and Wisconsin put aside these human considerations and did the right thing at the right time.

When plans for the 1868 Missouri-Wisconsin colloquy were being formulated, it soon became obvious that there were two different ideas about what the agenda should contain. President Bading, operating with his synod’s request for a discussion of parish problems and assuming that Wisconsin orthodoxy had been

sufficiently demonstrated by word and deed, suggested that there was no need to discuss doctrine. President Walther begged to differ and replied emphatically: “We cannot dispensate ourselves from our instructions....If we find ourselves on common ground in this [the Word of God] then the practical matters will easily adjust themselves.” Bading agreed to discuss doctrine, as he says, “over against my Synod.”^{xliv} The correctness of Walther’s position, the firmness and fairness of his manner in presenting it induced President Bading to yield a point, even if that meant swallowing some synod pride.

A more bitter pill had to be swallowed by Minnesota in the spring of 1870. As has been related, Minnesota was seeking closer ties with Wisconsin at this time and had also had a successful colloquy with Wisconsin. Then, however, Wisconsin not only reacted unfavorably to the proposal for closer ties but also even failed to pass a formal resolution acknowledging Minnesota’s orthodoxy. Minnesota passed two resolutions of regret over the double rebuff. Humanly speaking, there was a grave threat to future fellowship. But Minnesota also resolved “most energetically to practice the brotherly fellowship of faith previously carried on with the honorable Wisconsin Synod and to let nothing go unattempted in order to bring about, with the help of God, the proposed union.”^{xlv} How this patience and longsuffering of Minnesota was blessed by the Lord with closer ties and larger fellowship is well known and need not be recounted here.

Minnesota’s president from 1869–1876, J.H. Sieker, also merits mention in this connection. His part in the withdrawal from the General Council is a good example of that rare but valuable characteristic of frankly admitting the mistake or misjudgment that has been made. Too often in the church, as in other areas, clinging to error compounds it until the task of extrication is almost impossible. Sieker, it will be recalled, in 1870 judged Minnesota’s membership in the General Council to be proper and defended it in the *Gemeinde-Blatt*. Within six months he reversed his position when new evidence of the General Council’s wavering convinced him that he had misjudged the situation. Publicly and frankly he admitted his mistake and thereby rendered his synod a service as valuable as any other he supplied during his presidency.

The characteristics of patience and humility that Sieker and the other fathers demonstrated on the pathway into the Synodical Conference are not the virtues that attract the world’s attention or win its acclaim. Dealings with the brother on the grassroots level or endeavors to uphold the truth and foster true fellowship are not deemed important or useful by our day and age. These all belong to the Bible’s “few things” of which Matthew 25:21 says: “Thou hast been faithful over a few things; I will make thee ruler over many things.”

If the Lord wills through His Holy Spirit to guide us in this centennial of the founding of the Synodical Conference or in any other year into a new Synodical Conference, then we can have no better desire than to go into the new fellowship on the same pathways the fathers walked one hundred years ago. If He wills otherwise, the pathways are still to be followed faithfully, also in our commemoration this July of the birthday of the Synodical Conference. That suggests the proper tone and theme of the observance. What that should be was clearly and eloquently indicated on the occasion of the golden anniversary of the Synodical Conference in 1922 when two who cherished it wrote jubilee articles for the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. Professor Pieper closed his extensive “Jubilee Thoughts” with the admonition:

But that is the great fault of the church of our time; we pastors and teachers of the church do not study enough and pray even less—We get too concerned about ecclesiastical externals and lead a much too impoverished inner life of the spirit....That is our fault, and the source lies in the pastor’s studyroom and prayer chamber out of which the Spirit has taken flight, because we are studying and praying only professionally and all too infrequently personally. If a further decay of the Lutheran Church of our land is to be halted and a new springtime of the Spirit is to come,—it will first have to be Pentecost again in the pastor’s study.^{xlvi}

Professor Koehler concluded his 1922 anniversary contribution in this fashion:

The present confused conditions of the world will place us before an assignment, about whose immensity we cannot now derive an adequate conception. But God has also endowed us through

the settlement of the election controversy achieved up to this point with powers that were not available at the close of the Thirty Years' War. Only if we recognize this talent, will we be truly thankful to God and only thus can a true jubilee joy be engendered. Then our gratitude will also manifest itself in this that we use the talent faithfully. That is why the present situation calls for no loud hurrah but a hallowed quiet seriousness that with trust in God is firmly centered on the work that lies before us. Luther's old hymn seems to me to be the right expression of the temper of this present time.

We now implore God the Holy Ghost
For the true faith, which we need the most,
That in our last moments He may befriend us
And, as homeward we journey, attend us. Lord, have mercy!

Shine in our hearts, O most precious Light,
That we Jesus Christ may know aright,
Clinging to our Savior, whose blood hath bought us,
Who again to our homeland hath bro't us. Lord, have mercy!

Thou sacred Love, grace on us bestow,
Set our hearts with heav'nly fire aglow
That with hearts united we love each other,
Of one mind, in peace with ev'ry brother. Lord, have mercy!

Thou highest Comfort in ev'ry need,
Grant that neither shame nor death we heed,
That e'en then our courage may never fail us
When the Foe shall accuse and assail us. Lord, have mercy!^{xlvii}

Endnotes

ⁱ Armin W. Schuetze, "Lessons From the Past," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* LXIX (January 1972), 3–12.

ⁱⁱ *Verhandlungen der deutschen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Synode von Wisconsin und anderen Staaten* (Milwaukee, 1872), pp. 2–3. Hereafter the citation will be *Wisconsin Proceedings* with date.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Verhandlungen der Deutschen Evangelisch-Luth. Synode von Minnesota und anderen Staaten* (Minnesota Volksblatt, 1872), p. 1. Hereafter the citation will be *Minnesota Proceedings* with date.

^{iv} Martin Walker, "The Jubilee in 1872," in *Ebenezer*, W. Dau, ed. (St. Louis, 1922), 308.

^v *Evangelisch-Lutherisches Gemeinde-Blatt*, VII (Feb. 1, 1872), 7. Hereafter cited as GB with indication of volume, date, and page.

^{vi} *Lehre und Wehre*, XVII (May 1871), 154.

^{vii} John Philip Koehler's *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (The Protestant Conference, 1970), in its section, "Increased Friction with Missouri," (pp.79–86) offers a good account of these difficulties. Hereafter this work will be cited simply as Koehler, *History*.

^{viii} *Wisconsin Proceedings*, 1868, p.9.

^{ix} Koehler, *History*, p. 118.

^x *Wisconsin Proceedings*, 1868, pp.27–28. Reference is frequently made to this section of the 1868 *Proceedings* in the material which follows.

^{xi} *Verhandlungen der vierzehnten Jahresversammlung des Noerdlichen Districts der deutschen evang.-luth. Synode von Missouri, Ohio u.a. Staaten* (St. Louis, 1868), pp.28–29. The subsequent paragraphs are drawn from the secretary's summary of the discussions.

^{xii} John P. Meyer, "Steps Taken by Our Synod in 1868 Towards the Founding of the Synodical Conference," *Northwestern Lutheran*, XXXV (May 9, 1948), 152. This is one of a long series of informative articles that Prof. Meyer wrote on the founding of the Synodical Conference on the occasion of its diamond jubilee beginning in 1947 and extending into 1948.

^{xiii} C.F.W. Walther, "Wieder eine Friedensbotschaft," *Lutheraner*, XXV (Nov. 1, 1868), 37.

^{xiv} H. Meyer, *Pflanzungsgeschichte des Minnesota Districts der Ev. Luth. Synode von Missouri, Ohio und andern Staaten* (Minneapolis, 1932), p. 11.

^{xv} *G-B*, VII (Jan. 1, 1872), 8.

^{xvi} *G-B*, VII (Feb. 1, 1872), 7.

^{xvii} *G-B*, VII (Four successive issues beginning with April 1, 1872). Koehler, *History*, p. 133 has a variant listing, dividing Thesis 2 and including Thesis 5 in his Thesis 3. This is the arrangement of material used by the Minnesota Synod in its subsequent deliberations.

- xviii H. Fick and E.A. Brauer, “Bericht ueber das reit der ehrwuerdigen Synode von Minnesota abgehaltene Colloquium,” *Lutheraner* XXVIII (July 1, 1872), 149–150.
- xix *Minnesota Proceedings, 1872*, pp.11–26.
- xx *Lutheraner*, XXVIII (May 15, 1872), 126–7.
- xxi *G-B*, III (Dec. 1 and Dec. 15, 1867), 1 in both cases.
- xxii *G-B*, IV (Dec. 15, 1868), 1.
- xxiii *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1869*, pp. 7 and 24.
- xxiv *Minnesota Proceedings, 1869*, p. 33.
- xxv Richard C. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America* (Philadelphia, 1966), pp. 167-168. Hereafter cited as Wolf, *Documents*. Sieker’s German version of the questions appears in *Minnesota Proceedings, 1870*, pp. 11-12.
- xxvi *Minnesota Proceedings, 1870*, pp. 9-12.
- xxvii *Minnesota Proceedings, 1870*, p. 44.
- xxviii Wolf, *Documents*, p. 169.
- xxix *G-B*, VI (Dec. 15, 1870), 2.
- xxx *G-B*, VI (Dec. 15, 1870), 1-2. The eight fine-print comments are themselves almost a column long.
- xxxi *Minnesota Proceedings, 1871*, pp. 43-44.
- xxxii *Lutheraner*, XXVII (Aug. 15, 1871), 190.
- xxxiii *Smalcald Articles*, -“Of the Power...,” 42.
- xxxiv *Minnesota Proceedings, 1869*, p. 16.
- xxxv *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1870*, pp. 10-11.
- xxxvi *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1870*, p. 34.
- xxxvii *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1870*, pp. 33-34.
- xxxviii *Minnesota Proceedings, 1870*, p. 9.
- xxxix *Minnesota Proceedings, 1870*, pp. 8-9.
- xl *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1872*, p. 20.
- xli Koehler, *History*, p. 142. The Illinois State University story is told by Koehler on pp. 63-64.
- xlii *Synodal-Bericht der Allgemeinen Deutschen Evan.-Luth. Synode von Missouri, Ohio, u. a. Staaten* (St. Louis, 1869), p. 96. Hereafter cited as *Missouri Proceedings* with the year added.
- xliii *Missouri Proceedings, 1872*, pp. 95-96.
- xliv Koehler, *History*, p. 129.
- xlvi *Minnesota Proceedings, 1870*, p. 43.
- xlvii Aug. Pieper, “Jubilaumsgedanken,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, XXI (April 1924), 111.
- xlviii John Ph. Koehler, “Die Synodalkonferenz in der Geschichte der amerikanische—lutherischen Kirche,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, XIX (July 1922), 180-181.

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