

# The Great Debate With Missouri

By Edward C. Fredrich

[In the fall of 1975 one of the topics treated at the Seminary Pastors' Institute was "Wisconsin's Interchurch Relations." This article is the fourth of the five lectures by the author on that topic.]

In the brief span of time between the appearance of its *Brief Statement* and the death of its leader, Franz Pieper, in 1931 and the adoption of its "1938 Resolutions" at the convention of that year, a startling change seems to have taken place in the Missouri Synod. Some aspects of the Missouri transformation during those years are commendable: the vigorous outreach into all areas of the United States, completed in the late 1930's when the last state, Arizona, was entered; healthy expansion in overseas mission endeavors; evangelism efforts; radio ministry. The list could be extended much farther.

There was, however, also a disturbing development in the transformation. The series of doctrinal discussions begun in the mid 1930's with representatives of the then newly born first American Lutheran Church culminated in 1938 convention action of Missouri that caused Wisconsin to speak out in admonition and protest in 1939. That was the beginning of a continuing fellowship endeavor on Wisconsin's part to maintain the Synodical Conference on its old foundations, an endeavor that was to last for over two decades until it had to be ended with the break in fellowship with Missouri in 1961 and the withdrawal from the Synodical Conference in 1963.

This long drawn-out effort to maintain a precious fellowship is a major chapter in the story of Wisconsin's interchurch relations. Future developments may well show us that this episode is the most significant and important occurrence in all of our church body's history. It is a subject worthy of our most careful study.

It isn't only the natural interest in conflict, the drama of role reversal in history, the pathos of broken fellowship that should motivate our determined efforts to know the *why* and *what* and *how* of this development in our interchurch relations. Such knowledge is vital because the final chapters in the story, it seems, still remain to be written.

There are loose ends to be dealt with. There are others who opposed Missouri's new course as vigorously as we, if not more so, who are still standing aloof from us. There are triangular fellowship situations still pending overseas that need to be regularized very soon. Since 1969 Missouri seemingly has taken steps leading back in the direction of the old pathways. They are steps that can only be plotted and platted properly in reference to the original path and the original byway. All this points up the relevance and overriding importance of the topic.

## I. Before 1955

It all began in 1938–1939. A study of the Missouri decline obviously reaches back beyond that time. Our assignment permits us to make 1939 our vantage point. So far as our interchurch relations are concerned, that is when tangible efforts are first made, when a new chapter in Missouri-Wisconsin relations begins.

### First Stage of the Protests

At its 1938 St. Louis convention, Missouri had before it a report of the committee that had been appointed in 1935 and that had held six meetings with representatives of the American Lutheran Church. The convention action was to pass the "1938 Resolutions."<sup>1</sup> The most significant items in the lengthy resolutions are reproduced in the following quotations:

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<sup>1</sup> *Missouri Proceedings*, 1938, pp 231–233. All references to convention reports will be similarly abbreviated.

The *Brief Statement* of the Missouri Synod, together with the *Declaration* of the representatives of the American Lutheran Church and the provisions of this entire report...be regarded as the doctrinal basis for *future church-fellowship*...

*in regard to the points of non-fundamental doctrines mentioned in the Declaration* (Antichrist, conversion of Israel, resurrection of martyrs, thousand years)...we endeavor to establish *full* agreement...

Christian practice must harmonize with Christian doctrine...We refer particularly to the attitude toward the anti-Christian lodge, anti-Scriptural pulpit- and altar-fellowship, and all forms of unionism...

this whole matter must be submitted for approval to the other synods constituting the Synodical Conference.

In the same year the American Lutheran Church reacted in three ways. It declared the *Brief Statement* “viewed in the light of” its Declaration not in contradiction to the “Minneapolis Theses.” It asserted that it was “firmly convinced that it is neither necessary nor possible to agree in all non-fundamental doctrines.” It insisted that it would not give up its American Lutheran Conference membership.<sup>2</sup>

What Missouri and the American Lutheran Church had done in the matter in 1938 was studied by a specially appointed committee made up of the Conference of Presidents and the Seminary faculty, then consisting of five men. An executive committee was set up on which were Presidents Brenner, Bergmann, Kirchner and Pankow; Professors Lehninger and Meyer; and Pastor Ed. Reim, who had, as it will be recalled, been involved with the question of church union already in 1935 when the ULCA “Overture” was studied.<sup>3</sup> What is today generally regarded as the indispensable agency in intersynodical matters, the Commission on Inter-church Relations, thus was born by a presidential appointment to meet a need of the hour.

This committee placed before Wisconsin’s 1939 convention its finding that the “doctrinal basis established by the Missouri Synod and by the American Lutheran Church...is not acceptable. Not two statements should be issued as a basis for agreement; a single joint statement, covering the contested doctrines thetically and antithetically...is imperative...The sincerity of any theoretical statement must also be evidenced by a clean church practice.”

The convention floor committee endorsed this call for a single union document. It added the caution that ALC-ULCA agreements on Scripture in the well-known “Pittsburgh Agreement” had so clouded the issue that continuing negotiations between the ALC and any Synodical Conference members would involve a denial of the truth and would cause confusion and disturbance and should be suspended until the air could be cleared. Finally, the floor committee called for the appointment of a continuing committee on current union endeavors. For the first it was called the “Committee on Union Matters.”

That committee met with Missouri representatives three times between 1939 and 1941, twice with Norwegian and Slovak committees present. The endeavor to persuade Missouri men to our declared position on union discussions was not successful.<sup>4</sup> The Missouri convention in 1941, however, did ask for the single union document and insisted that sister synods have the opportunity of prior consultation. The Wisconsin convention in 1941 reiterated the resolution of 1939 and asked for a committee, subsequently called “Standing Committee on Church Union,” that would represent it at Synodical Conference discussions of the issues.

By 1944 the one joint doctrinal statement was produced by ALC-Missouri representatives. Pastors who have reached their fiftieth year in age will recall the laborious efforts of Wisconsin Synod conferences to complete a study of this so-called “Doctrinal Affirmation.” The document could not have been as totally bad as the oblivion to which it has been assigned seems to suggest. Actually, Missouri didn’t like the “Affirmation” because it sounded too much like Ohio-Iowa talk, while the ALC didn’t like it because it was too close to the

<sup>2</sup> ALC *Minutes*, 1938, pp 7–11.

<sup>3</sup> For this and subsequent paragraphs see *Wisconsin Proceedings*, 1939, pp 59–61.

<sup>4</sup> In this section the pertinent document is *Wisconsin Proceedings*, 1941, pp 74–78.

“Brief Statement.” The ALC rejection of the “Affirmation” in 1946 insured that it would have no greater standing in church history records than as a preliminary to the “Common Confession.”

In the mood that prevailed after the failure of the “one joint statement” the ALC commissioners issued the “Friendly Invitation” of March 4, 1947, which declared for an “allowable and wholesome latitude of theological opinion on the basis of the teachings of the Word of God.” At the same time it called the demand for a unified statement of doctrine as an absolute condition of fellowship a “threat to evangelical liberty of conscience.”<sup>5</sup>

At this point both Missouri and the ALC resolved to push ahead. The next effort produced the “Common Confession.” Before giving attention to this “Common Confession,” however, it may be well to catch up with other developments that were disturbing our interchurch relations with Missouri.

War emergencies were in part a cause of some of these difficulties. The threats to peace posed by militant dictators already in 1935 had caused the Missouri convention of that year to give its Army and Navy Commission *carte blanche* to deal with any emergency that might develop. Within three years Missouri was in the national military chaplaincy program. In 1939 we resolved not to participate and did not change our stand despite repeated studies of the matter.<sup>6</sup>

Early in 1941 delegates of the Missouri Synod at an interchurch conference in Columbus agreed to a coordination in relief work for orphaned foreign missions and in welfare work among service men. Our union committee questioned this as an action endangering the unity of the Synodical Conference. Thus the “cooperation in externals” issue was born that posed another danger to the Synodical Conference fellowship.<sup>7</sup>

The 1944 Saginaw convention of the Missouri Synod produced two even greater threats to that fellowship.<sup>8</sup> For one thing, Missouri abandoned its long-standing opposition to Boy Scouting. With the claim that Scouting did not violate its principles, Missouri resolved that individual congregations could decide for themselves whether or not they would have troops in their midst. Serious disturbances in our parishes very soon resulted. In the eyes of many of Wisconsin’s lay members this became the key issue in our relations with Missouri. The Scouting question obviously became a major subject for synodical and intersynodical discussion.

In 1944 Missouri also committed itself to the ill-fated and impossible effort to draw a distinction on the basis of Scripture between prayer fellowship and joint prayer. After standing with the Synodical Conference on the premise of no prayer fellowship with errorists, even through its own long drawn-out “Brux Case,” Missouri in 1944 resolved that “joint prayer at intersynodical conferences, asking God for His guidance and blessing upon the deliberations and discussions of His Word” did not militate against its previous prayer fellowship stand, “provided such prayer does not imply denial of truth or support of error.”

At the same time concerned Synodical Conference members could not help noting a growing number of instances that saw Missouri pastors and officials practicing fellowship with those not united in doctrine. Professorial and editorial meetings, forums of theological students, lay gatherings furnished the occasion for such actions. The upshot was that some who espoused such practices ventured to issue an apology—using the word in the original sense. This was the “Statement of the 44” which openly challenged the old Synodical Conference fellowship position and which was never adequately disavowed, even though withdrawn as far as discussion was concerned.<sup>9</sup>

This procedure of withdrawal without decision would be used repeatedly and would invariably complicate already complicated situations that were disturbing Synodical Conference interchurch relations. Other instances that come to mind are the disposal of the “1938 Resolutions” in 1947, the nonfunctioning status accorded the “Common Confession” in 1956, and the withdrawal of disturbing Scharlemann essays in 1962.

<sup>5</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1947*, p 101.

<sup>6</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1939*, pp 67–68.

<sup>7</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1941*, p 77.

<sup>8</sup> *Missouri Proceedings, 1944*, pp 257–258 and 251–252, provide the documentation for this paragraph and the next.

<sup>9</sup> Numerous articles on the “Statement” were written at the time. More recently the *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* devoted a whole issue, XLIII (November 1970), to the subject.

This usage demonstrates better than almost anything else the inability to exercise doctrinal discipline that characterized “New” Missouri from its first emergence to the present day.

The bill of particulars set down in the previous paragraphs is so strong an indictment that the question immediately suggests itself how the Synodical Conference fellowship could have so long survived these repeated attacks on it. Hindsight at the range of a quarter of a century strongly suggests that judgment must have been dulled or duped to have permitted the sorry situation to drag on so long. Twenty-five years ago, and still a dozen years from the final eventuality, the picture was not all that clear.

In fact, one of the problems was that there just wasn’t a whole picture to be viewed. Rather, there were a series of incidents not as yet discerned as being closely and intimately related. As each new disturbing element emerged on the Synodical Conference scene, it was accompanied by the loud and insistent chorus, “Nothing has changed!” It was hard to believe that Missouri could have gotten so far off the old pathways in so short a time. The inclination was to blame the errors on a leftist and vocal few. The admonition tended to be ineffective because it could not help being aimed in a half dozen directions at the same time.

### **Sharper Synodical Confrontations**

With the advent of the 1950’s at least one problem became dominant, the new doctrinal statement developed mainly through 1949 and gaining acceptance in its final form from ALC and Missouri commissioners on December 5–6, 1949. This was the “Common Confession—Part One.” A supplementary “Part Two” that was to provide additions and clarifications was finally readied by the committees on February 9, 1953.

The document was received by Wisconsin and acted on at the 1951 Convention after being given attention at the local, conference, and district levels on the basis of a thorough review prepared at the request of the Standing Committee on Church Union.<sup>10</sup> The significant 1951 convention resolution reads:

That we inform the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod that we not only find the Common Confession to be inadequate in the points noted (cf. Review of the Common Confession), but that we also hold that the adoption of the Common Confession by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod involves an untruth and creates a basically untruthful situation since this action has been officially interpreted as a settlement of past differences which are in fact not settled.

A related statement pointed out that the resolution was motivated by “a loving concern for the heart of the Gospel, the Sola Gratia.” The lengthy floor committee report, embodying the quoted resolution and statement, was discussed during the greater part of eight convention sessions and was then unanimously adopted.

When Missouri in 1953 simply reaffirmed its 1950 acceptance of the “Common Confession,” our 1953 convention declared that this reaffirmation of the “Common Confession” along with “persistent adherence to unionistic practices” had “brought about the present break in relations that is now threatening the existence of the Synodical Conference and the continuance of our affiliation with the sister Synod.”<sup>11</sup> In this situation a recessed convention and special district meetings had to consider the complicated problem and the proposal to break fellowship at that stage of events.

Meantime a veritable pamphlet war was being waged with both sides stating their case and attempting to refute the opposition. Very few, it seems, were persuaded to change views or sides. The polemical tracts undoubtedly had the good effect of strengthening the members of the Wisconsin Synod in their difficult stand. In this they were useful and necessary. In the interchurch relations field, however, little seems to have been accomplished.

<sup>10</sup> The “Common Confession” action is found in *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1951*, pp 146–148. The review is found on pp 128–138.

<sup>11</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1952*, pp 102–106. The quoted matter is from p 104.

In 1950 an outline of the Wisconsin position was presented in *Where Do We Stand?*, in the main a collection of *Northwestern Lutheran* articles by Professor Reim, secretary of the Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union.

In 1953 and 1954 our Conference of Presidents issued a series of eight-page tracts, 11 in all, that treated the main issues in controversy. The titles are:

1. Lutheran Bodies in the U. S. A.
2. 1938–1953
3. Every Sinner Declared Righteous
4. Not By My Own Reason or Strength
5. If the Trumpet Give an Undertain Sound
6. Chosen By Grace From Eternity
7. Our Position Against Scouting
8. Cooperation in Externals
9. Antichrist
10. Prayer Fellowship
11. The Chaplaincy Question

Tracts 3, 4, 5, 6 and 9 were devoted mainly to the “Common Confession.” The first two presented background material. Tracts 7, 8, 10 and 11 treated the four specific problems indicated by the titles. On the committee charged with the task of readying the materials for publication were men who would soon move to Missouri. It is, however, not necessary to conclude that the tracts were so inept that they had the reverse effect of gaining adherents for the other side.

While the tracts were appearing, the “Fraternal” exchange was also going on. It was set off by Missouri’s “A Fraternal Word.” Wisconsin replied with the obvious “A Fraternal Word Examined.” Next came Missouri’s “Another Fraternal Endeavor” and its “A Fraternal Reply,” in the main a response to the series of tracts previously described.

In the pamphlet exchanges charge was met by countercharge, and then there would be a counter-countercharge. The writings therefore make difficult reading today, but at the time, when the matter being discussed was a burning issue and had been one for some years, the intricate argumentation was not difficult to follow. The fact that the writing does not wear well today is not to be taken as an indication that the cause espoused was necessarily weak or faulty. Like all polemical pamphleteering, the writings of 1953 and 1954 lost some of their relevance with the passing years.

### **Synodical Conference Dealings**

In its efforts to maintain its fellowship relations with Missouri on the old basis, Wisconsin also made diligent use of the avenue for admonition available in the Synodical Conference. Already in its 1940 convention the Synodical Conference had devoted considerable time to the matter of Lutheran union, especially the dealings of Missouri with the ALC. It saw fit, however, to postpone final action because, as it said, “the outcome is still pending.”<sup>12</sup> It did second the demand for one document of agreement, urged close cooperation between the four union committees, and asked Missouri not to enter into fellowship with the ALC for the present. The 1942 Synodical Conference convention was a war casualty. No meeting was held.

At the 1944 Synodical Conference convention President Brenner by overture protested that Wisconsin had been confronted once again by an “accomplished fact” in the acceptance of the “Doctrinal Affirmation” by the Missouri committee prior to any consultation with Synodical Conference brethren. He also complained of “numerous instances of an anticipation of a union not yet existing.”<sup>13</sup> The result was the establishment of a

<sup>12</sup> *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1940*, p 89.

<sup>13</sup> *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1944*, pp 99–104.

permanent “Committee on Intersynodical Relations” consisting of the four synod presidents and two more representatives from each of the four synods. Our two representatives were Ed. Reim and A. Voss.

This Intersynodical Relations Committee in 1946 recommended a restudy of Scouting by the Missouri Synod, which the convention changed to a restudy by all synods.<sup>14</sup>

A request of the Twin Cities Mixed Pastoral Conference for a study of Army and Navy chaplaincies led to the establishment of a special “Interim Committee” given the assignment of investigating this matter and “all other matters relating to the doctrine of the call, the ministry, and the Church where there has been disagreement, with the aim of achieving complete agreement.” The unsuccessful efforts of this committee have already been mentioned in the previous installment.<sup>15</sup>

The growing difficulty of working within the framework of the Synodical Conference in the interest of maintaining a unity which the Conference no longer possessed is indicated by a procedural problem that arose in connection with the membership of this committee. The convention itself elected the two men that were to represent each synod and obviously the body with the greatest voting strength could thereby stack the committee in its favor. Wisconsin protested the election method but had to go along in order that some work might be done.

Perhaps this is the place briefly to touch on the inherent difficulties of the Synodical Conference in coping with the problem that threatened its existence. Since in American Lutheran church history this Conference represents the ultimate in a full-sized confessional federation, its demise can be superficially interpreted as evidence of the futility of forming a confessional federation. The platform, the confessional foundation, gets blamed for the crack-up, and the conclusion is drawn that a little less rigidity in the base will allow the structure to withstand stormy weather and sudden shifts in the prevailing wind.

That, however, is nothing else but a cart-before-the-horse viewpoint and argument. The Synodical Conference never presumed to be an umbrella-type organization that sheltered any and all brands of Lutheranism and kept them huddled under all circumstances. It had no operational formulas for doctrinal compromise or cooperation in internals. It presumed the full doctrinal unity of its member synods. Precedent from its early years demonstrated that disunity involved dismemberment. When Missouri set off on a pathway that took it away from the historical positions of the Synodical Conference, that was a failing, not of the Synodical Conference, but of Missouri. When Missouri insisted on following that errant pathway until the distance gap in itself demonstrated separation, the resultant break was not something the Synodical Conference caused or failed to prevent but simply had to recognize.

The Synodical Conference’s difficulties were graphically demonstrated by its first conventions in the 1950’s. Meetings at Ft. Wayne in 1950 and the Twin Cities in 1952 reached new lows in strife and bitterness, divided reports, and bloc voting. Positions had hardened, in most cases along synodical lines, with Missouri and the Slovaks lined up against Wisconsin and the Norwegians.

So bleak was the picture that immediately following the 1952 St. Paul convention the Wisconsin delegation resorted to an *in statu confesionis* declaration. The chief reason for the declaration was, in its own words:

because the confessional basis on which the synods of the Synodical Conference have jointly stood so far has been seriously impaired by the Common Confession, we continue to uphold our protest and to declare that the Missouri Synod by retaining the Common Confession and using it for further steps toward union with the ALC is disrupting the Synodical Conference.<sup>16</sup>

The state of protest was explained thus: “While we await a decision of our Synod in this grave situation we continue our present relationship with the Missouri Synod only in the hope that it may still come to see the error of its way.”

<sup>14</sup> *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1946*, pp 57–61. This is also the location of the next quotation.

<sup>15</sup> E.C. Fredrich, “Wisconsin’s Interchurch Relations in the First Third of This Century.”

<sup>16</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1953*, p 104, note. This is also the location of the next quotation.

Despite this bleak picture, a heroic effort was made to use the Synodical Conference forum in 1954 as a tool in solving the problems and eliminating the differences. As Wisconsin in its 1953 convention requested, the Synodical Conference president was prevailed upon “to arrange a program for the convention of 1954 that would devote all its sessions to a thorough consideration...of the doctrinal issues involved.”<sup>17</sup>

That convention recessed from East Detroit in August to Chicago in November in order to carry out its assignment. Delegates heard presentations on the “Common Confession”—one by a Missouri man, one by a Wisconsin man, and one by a Norwegian—two on scouting and military chaplaincy, and two on other issues—in each case by a Missouri and a Wisconsin representative.

The presentations run to almost a hundred closely printed pages. Wisconsin’s newly elected president, in an at least partially ill-advised effort to indicate his synod’s grassroots solidarity, risked allowing the body to be represented by young and run-of-the-mill Michigan District pastors, in two out of the three instances. The whole 1954 effort merely served to indicate once more, at the cost of over 50,000 printed and who knows how many spoken words, that the Synodical Conference was a house divided. Yet that 1954 Synodical Conference effort does demonstrate that every God-pleasing effort was being made to heal the breaches, no matter how bleak the prospect of any success seemed to human eye. That was the situation as 1954 ended and the time came for the 1955 Wisconsin Synod convention.

## **II. During and After 1955**

One would have to go back as far as 1868 for a synodical convention to equal that of 1955 in significance for the interchurch relations field. What should have been done is still being debated and even what was done is still on occasion in dispute. By convention time our allies, the Norwegians, had broken fellowship with Missouri but remained in the Synodical Conference. Strangely enough, among the leading advocates of this action were some who would soon assume leadership positions in Missouri.

### **To the Brink of a Break**

Two factors to a certain extent in conflict with one another weighed heavily in determining the 1955 convention’s deliberations and decisions. The unsatisfactory state of affairs in relations with the Missouri Synod had not been improved despite a decade and a half of earnest effort. In fact, there had been discernible deterioration. There was a growing feeling on the part of many synod members that the intolerable situation could not go on much longer.

What made the situation serious in the extreme was the real possibility that those admonishing others for unionism might well be involving themselves in the same wrong by continuing a fellowship that no longer was based on unity. All this added up to the conviction that something drastic would have to be done in 1955.

At the same time, there was the inescapable factor of chronology and timetable. There had been years of admonitions, but also a variety of them. Single instances and different issues commanded attention with the result that concern and agreement also varied from instance to instance. The public admonition and protest became more unified in the dual convention of 1953 under the rubric of unionism. The admonition in that year also reached a high point of seriousness and severity from which it was easier to recede than to progress.<sup>18</sup>

It was, however, a fact of the timetable, which has now been generally forgotten, that that 1953 admonition had not yet been considered by a Missouri convention before the time of our meeting at Saginaw. In those days Missouri had conventions every three years, about the same time of the year as now. Missouri’s 1953 convention had consequently been held prior to ours in that year and there would not be another until 1956. For those who like to mull over church history from the perspective of the hypothetical, here is an interesting question: How different would the story be if there had been a Missouri convention in June 1955 instead of June 1956?

<sup>17</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1953*, p 105.

<sup>18</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1953*, pp 102–106.

In any event, many at Saginaw were either concerned or frustrated, because they had no response from a Missouri convention to what we had said in 1953. At the same time, not just many, but all at Saginaw felt the need to press on in the duty of admonition. The interplay of these two factors produced the Saginaw resolutions, so well known and frequently discussed that no lengthy description is needed.<sup>19</sup>

The resolution was introduced by a preamble reviewing previous charges of unionistic practices on the part of Missouri and declaring that a break in relations had thereby been brought about. This preamble was unanimously adopted. Then by a 2–1 vote it was decided to hold in abeyance, until Missouri had met, the final vote on the resolution that:

Whereas the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has created divisions and offenses by its resolutions, policies, and practices not in accord with Scripture, we in obedience to the command of our Lord in Romans 16:17–18, terminate our fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Some fifty convention delegates protested the vote postponement. Among them was Professor Reim, whose offer to resign as secretary of the Church Union Committee and as president and professor at the Seminary was replied to by the convention with a vote of confidence.

It might be mentioned that the same floor committee that proposed the much debated resolution just quoted also brought in another resolution equally, if not more, significant in the interchurch relations field. It proposed the drafting of a “single, concise confession of our doctrine and practice in theses and antitheses pertinent to present day controversies.” Eventually the document, *This We Believe*, would be produced.

When the special 1956 Wisconsin convention assembled it had before it a report of the Standing Committee on Church Union that urged that the Wisconsin Synod “hold the judgment of our Saginaw resolutions in abeyance.”<sup>20</sup> There were still unresolved issues such as Scouting, military chaplaincy, prayer fellowship, and the like. The perplexing issue of the “Common Confession” had to a certain extent been alleviated. If the document was not safely interred in unconsecrated ground, at least it had been relegated to some sort of limbo reserved for non-functioning union documents that the rush of Lutheran merger has passed by. Missouri had also gratefully acknowledged our concerns and admonitions.

The special convention by a 5–1 margin resolved to hold the 1955 judgment in abeyance. It also endorsed participation in a proposed “conclave of theologians” which would bring other brethren into a discussion of unresolved issues.

This placed the burning interchurch relations questions squarely before the 1957 New Ulm convention. That convention was nearly equally divided on the issues. One group was convinced that the time had come for decisive action. It was their conviction that continuing fellowship with Missouri was unionism, the sin Missouri was charged with. On a less crucial level, they held that by such continuation the Wisconsin Synod itself was running the risk of disunity in its own ranks and of the eventual decimation of its membership by withdrawals.

Others were of the view that whatever had developed between 1956 and 1957 was not of sufficient weight to force a change from “holding in abeyance our judgment” to break fellowship. They urged that the burden of proof lay with those that wanted to break fellowship, proof that Missouri had done or failed to do enough in the intervening year to warrant the serious step of breaking fellowship.

The Standing Committee on Church Union reported but did not recommend.<sup>21</sup> Its report was on the whole rather discouraging and included the announcement of an inconclusive burial of the “Common Confession” and the possibility that it might return to the land of the living—if not to function, perhaps to haunt. Some hopeful signs were offset by discouraging developments.

<sup>19</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1955*, pp 85–88, supplies the documentation for the next three paragraphs.

<sup>20</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1956*, pp 52–61, contains all the pertinent material for this section. The quoted matter is on p 57.

<sup>21</sup> This report is found in *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1957*, pp 130–136.



The Floor Committee reported a recommendation to break fellowship.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently that matter has been mythologized into a unanimous floor committee report that the convention rejected. A careful reading of the report will indicate that it is not signed by the secretary and that a few others dissented. Actually the floor committee vote was something like 16–4. The minority departed from the custom of those days of submitting its own report in the interest of giving those arguing the break an unclouded opportunity to advocate their case before the whole convention, without reference to an opposition document. Two of the minority expressed their views from the floor.<sup>23</sup>

The convention heard the lengthy debate, lengthy in that hours well into the evening were devoted to it, not lengthy in respect to individual speeches that were soon limited to a few minutes. The convention was not persuaded. By a vote of 61 to 77, with 8 abstentions, it rejected the resolution to break and resolved instead to “continue our vigorously protesting fellowship.”<sup>24</sup> It also urged a continuation of efforts to restore full unity.

### **Last-Ditch Efforts**

These efforts were to involve doctrinal discussions on two levels, the joint union committees of the Synodical Conference and the conclave of theologians that would bring the overseas brethren into the picture. The first of these had been proposed by the 1956 Synodical Conference. Its major task would be an effort to draw up a common doctrinal statement to serve the Synodical Conference.

In this endeavor work was divided into three categories of doctrines and related problems:

1. Atonement, Justification, and the Dynamic of the Christian Life (Scouting);
2. Scripture (Revelation; Inspiration; Principles of Interpretation; open questions); and Eschatology (Antichrist);
3. Grace, Conversion, Election, and Church and Ministry (Fellowship, Unionism, Chaplaincy, Discipline).

Discussions along this line were begun in early 1957 and continued for several years, with several two-day meetings held each year. The first subject assigned for discussion was Scripture and Eschatology.<sup>25</sup>

By the time of our 1959 convention an excellent statement on Scripture, its inspiration, authority, and interpretation had been formulated. It was, the minutes say, “adopted without a dissenting voice and with the full consent of those present in the convention.”<sup>26</sup> The other three Synodical Conference synods also adopted the statement on Scripture. It was fitting that the Synodical Conference’s swan song should be a testimony to its historic position on the Holy Scriptures. That was, however, the last of the doctrinal statements to be accepted by all four member synods.

Our 1959 convention could also unanimously adopt the statement on the Antichrist. Unfortunately the Missouri Synod saw fit to pass this matter by on the questionable grounds that the Antichrist statement had not yet been acted upon by a convention of the Synodical Conference.<sup>27</sup>

Even more serious was the development regarding a statement on Church Fellowship drawn up by the Wisconsin Synod Union Committee. This statement was ready by the time our convention was held in 1959 and the convention resolved to make it available for study in pamphlet form.<sup>28</sup> An effort had been made to get a written reaction from Missouri representatives by convention time. What was forthcoming was the answer that the area where there was difference was joint prayer “beyond the existing confessional fellowship” and that it

<sup>22</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1957*, pp 141–144, supplies this report.

<sup>23</sup> The writer was the secretary of the Floor Committee.

<sup>24</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1957*, p 144.

<sup>25</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1957*, p 131 and 136.

<sup>26</sup> This action and other 1959 decisions are recorded in *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1959*, pp 164–212.

<sup>27</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1959*, p 173.

<sup>28</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1959*, pp 205–208.

appeared “premature to attempt a formulation” before there had been a committee discussion of the representations of all the synods.<sup>29</sup> The difficulty of extracting a statement on fellowship from the Missouri men was frustrating, to say the least. When the statement was finally obtained, it indicated a serious difference within the Synodical Conference in both doctrine and practice.

Meantime another avenue of approach was being attempted. Representatives of overseas bodies in fellowship with the Synodical Conference joined the discussions. The first so-called “Conference of Theologians” met June 10–12, 1959, at Oakland. Seven Wisconsin men attended and one, Professor Vogel, read an essay on “Our Fellowship in the Lutheran Confessions: Our Common Task—a paper on the genuinely ecumenical character of our Lutheran Confessions and the possibilities and the obligation of an ecumenical contribution by Lutherans on the basis of our Confessions.”

Evidences of a strong fellowship stand in various overseas churches were noted, and it was resolved to hold another such conference just before the 1960 Synodical Conference convention. The meeting place was Mequon.

Regarding this Mequon meeting our Commission on Doctrinal Matters reported:

We sincerely regret that the earnest wrestling with the problem on the part of the Thiensville Conference of Theologians has not resolved the impasse. Therefore we plead with all of our brethren at the Synodical Conference convention to give this matter their prayerful consideration by evaluating this sad situation in the light of God’s Word.<sup>30</sup>

The impasse referred to had come to light in the discussion of fellowship. In January 1960 Missouri representatives offered a statement entitled, “Theology of Fellowship—Part I,” supplemented the following May by additional materials.<sup>31</sup> Joint prayer beyond the confessional fellowship was upheld, and it was contended that there is an obligation to express a so-called “growing edge” of fellowship in a limited way toward those outside the confessional-organizational grouping. In May 1960 an impasse was declared.

Our representatives were meeting under the 1959 convention instructions to “continue its efforts in the Joint Union Committees until agreement on doctrine and practice has been reached, or until an impasse is reached and no such agreement can be brought about.”<sup>32</sup> They accordingly reported the impasse to the Synodical Conference convention of 1960 and to our convention in 1961.<sup>33</sup>

Several more meetings were held on the matter. An overseas delegation presented their views for the consideration of our representatives. A proposal to create a new forum of discussion involving overseas theologians and centering on the doctrine of the church had been rejected for the obvious reasons that we were not minded to delay the matter for a considerable length of time to go over ground already covered. But there was a willingness to hear the overseas delegation. This was done in April 1961 without significant results.<sup>34</sup>

### **End of Fellowship**

The recessed 1961 Synodical Conference convention, meeting in Milwaukee May 17–19, was not able to accomplish anything in the way of bringing about some solution of the fellowship disagreement. In fact, doubts about Missouri’s stand on Scripture had to be read into the record.<sup>35</sup> All avenues had been attempted that could be attempted by a church body, serious about the application of Scripture fellowship teachings.

<sup>29</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1959*, p 176.

<sup>30</sup> *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1960*, p 46.

<sup>31</sup> Attached to the *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1960*, are the four statements on Fellowship. That of Missouri is found on pp 15–47 of the attachment.

<sup>32</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1959*, p 195.

<sup>33</sup> *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1960*, p 44 and *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1961*, pp 170–171.

<sup>34</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1961*, pp 171–172.

<sup>35</sup> *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1961*, p 15.

Our 1961 convention in Milwaukee had to react to the impasse. It voted 124–49 to suspend fellowship with The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and called for an orderly termination of joint projects.<sup>36</sup> It declared a willingness to discuss matters with Missouri and others “under proper conditions.” A fellowship in existence for over 90 years was terminated.

The related matter of Synodical Conference membership required special attention. A request was made that the Conference’s 1962 convention declare a dissolution of the body. When no such action was forthcoming, our body formally withdrew from the Synodical Conference, along with the Norwegians. A membership of over 90 years that had brought Wisconsin much joy and blessing was thus ended.

A quarter of a century had passed since the first problems in Missouri had been noted and rebuked. What kind of an evaluation does the view from 1975 place on the 25-year effort?

Certainly any objective observer will have to admit that great patience was demonstrated even when internal dissension threatened. Was too much patience shown? A break in 1955 or 1956 or 1957 might have prevented withdrawals, but the break in 1961 could be declared on a clear and demonstrated doctrinal difference. This is a decided plus factor.

Had any serious blunders been made along that long pathway of admonition? In hindsight one might wish that the 1955 resolutions had been set up differently. At the time it was the best the convention could offer and some other proposal might have been less useful than that which is on the record. In general, one could conclude by saying we will have to, and should be very willing to, live with the record that is now a part of the history of Lutheranism in America.

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<sup>36</sup> The 1961 resolutions are found in *Wisconsin Proceedings, 1961*, pp 197–200.