

**HOW PRAYER FELLOWSHIP CAUSED
A BREAK IN PRAYER FELLOWSHIP**

HOW MISSOURI'S DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE LED TO THE SPLIT WITH THE WISCONSIN SYNOD

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In the past fifty years of the Wisconsin Synod perhaps nothing has caused greater turmoil than the break in fellowship with the Missouri Synod. It severed not only the two Christian bodies, but it cut across family and friendship lines as well. The two synods that had "walked the path" together for decades went their separate ways. With the split came the disruption of joint mission work, pulpit and altar fellowship, and even joint meetings. On a personal level many a family was caused to rethink their relationship with other families with whom they once enjoyed full Christian unity.

Yet the break was not unexpected. It was many years in the making- even too long for some. After repeated attempts at reconciliation on the issues the Wisconsin Synod officially broke fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1961.

Certainly no single issue had the distinction of being the sole cause of division. The overseas chaplaincy program of the Missouri Synod, scouting, and the antichrist were just a few of the teachings under discussion. All these issues were sticking points. However, occupying a central role was the topic of fellowship, including prayer fellowship. This doctrine, as well as its highly visible practice, proved very divisive. This paper will look at how Missouri's position on prayer fellowship caused a break in prayer fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod. First, it will examine the Missouri Synod doctrinal and practical position. Then, it will briefly observe the Wisconsin doctrinal position and subsequent practice.

Before looking at the doctrinal position of the Missouri synod a few of the key passages need to be addressed. One passage that deals with fellowship in the church is Romans 16:17ff. In the first sixteen verses of Romans 16 Paul lists a catalog of Christians who are in unity with the church. He commends them for their faithful service. Then in the following verses Paul speaks concerning those who are not faithful. He urges the believers to "watch out for" and "keep away from" those who are causing offenses and divisions. He says, "they are not serving the Lord Christ, but their own stomachs." Paul's admonition to the Romans is clear- to mark and avoid those who are causing division.

However, what is somewhat more difficult to discern is the specific people with which Paul tells the Romans to be concerned. Are these *unbelievers* who are infiltrating the church? This certainly would not be a new concern in the New Testament. (2 Corinthians 6:14, 2 Timothy 3:1-5. There are several passages that also strongly *suggest* that unbelievers are being addressed- Matthew 7:15, 2 Timothy 2:17-19, Titus 3:9,10 and John 8:31)

Unbelievers were penetrating many Christian churches early in the church's history. In this case Paul's main concern in Romans 16:17ff might be a blatantly anti-Christian teaching such as abandoning the Christ of the Bible (as in 2 John, probably also Colossians and I John). Or he could be opposing a heresy like that of the Judaizers in Galatia.

However, this passage could be a general admonition directed

against misguided *Christians*. Paul may have in mind Christians (or anyone) who is twisting his words and teaching contrary to the truth. Then this would be a general statement that applies to any individual or group that teaches contrary to God's Word. It is difficult to assert absolutely who Paul has in mind. Nonetheless Romans 16:17 is probably best understood as a general command relating to anyone who causes divisions.

This would certainly be in keeping with a consistent theme of the Old and New Testament. Deuteronomy 4:2 (and Revelation 22:18,19) is just one general admonition to teach no more and no less than the revealed Word of God. God clearly pointed out in his first book, the Pentateuch, as well as the last, the importance of teaching His Word in its purity.

In the sermon on the mount Jesus gave another example of the importance of teaching his whole word. Specifically addressing the issue of the Old Testament law and prophets Jesus says, "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:19) This Scripture again emphasizes the importance of remaining true to the whole Word.

Though it is somewhat difficult to know specifically whom Paul is concerned with in Romans 16, the simplest way to understand the passage is in a general way- relating to anyone, Christian or non-Christian, who is teaching false doctrines. He could be addressing either or both, but the axiom most assuredly applies in either case.

This point then, that God is concerned that his whole Word is presented truthfully, is important to keep in mind today. It is really the key issue surrounding the discussion of fellowship. God is concerned with the truth. This is important to note because many of the doctrinal differences between Christians today are ones that appear to have developed subsequent to the writing of the New Testament. The New Testament Scripture doesn't suggest that the many and varied false ideas that are currently present in the church were extant at the time of Paul and the Apostles. Yet the general admonition throughout all of Scripture, and here in Romans 16:17, still applies today. "Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them."

Missouri's Position

A good understanding of the Missouri Synod's position on Church Fellowship is found in a 1960 Concordia publication Four Statements on Fellowship. The pamphlet includes a collection of doctrinal positions of the "four" members (ELS left in 1955) of the Synodical Conference. The Missouri synod position (which takes up about 2/3 of the 47 page document) is expounded upon with Scriptural basis in rather thorough fashion. It begins by explaining God's creation of mankind for fellowship with himself and then deals with the fellowship of believers. After discussing God's desire for unity among Christians the pamphlet explains passages that call for the breaking of fellowship.

In addressing Romans 16:17,18 Missouri's statement makes two distinctions which are of questionable value. For example, "It should be noted that Paul commands the church to mark and avoid *makers* of divisions and offenses, not their *victims*." (Four p.40) By this it is stating that Paul only has those who are propagating the false teaching in mind rather than anyone who holds to that teaching. Therefore, Paul's statement only applies to those who are actively spreading a false teaching.

It would seem rather that Paul has the general question of unity (the discussion of chapter 16) in focus and isn't concerned about making a distinction between makers and victims.

The second distinction that the pamphlet draws concerns the "teaching you have learned."

"The following should be noted also: doctrine, as Paul uses the word, is, to be sure, a comprehensive term and indicates the whole saving Gospel as it shapes the faith and life, creed and confession of the believer. It involves the Law and ultimately includes the whole counsel of God, but it cannot be simply equated with any formal system of doctrine or with any individual unit in such a system." (ibid)

To be sure the early Christians did not have the comprehensive, systematized "form" of Scriptural doctrine that we do today. This developed as the church throughout its history addressed false teachings. Yet of what value is the distinction between "the whole saving Gospel as it shapes the faith and life, creed and confession of the believer" and a "formal system of doctrine..." The saving gospel is the same gospel whether in a formal or non-formal "system." This distinction really is a

false distinction. The truth of God's saving will has not changed. (Besides that, ultimately a "system" always exists whether in written form or not.)

The pamphlet continues by citing Matthew 18 explaining that one of the church's goals is to restore erring brothers. This is an important reminder. We dare not mark and avoid or carry on church discipline without the intent of restoring. Yet before one can restore an erring brother one must identify him. Making a distinction between today's systematic classifications and the lack of such a system at the time of Paul does not seem helpful in discovering these erring brothers. We do well to make use of the difficult struggles that the church by God's grace has weathered.

The pamphlet warns against a church "mechanically" applying Romans 16:17 and other passages "to fellow Christians in a confessional-organizational fellowship other than one's own." Instead the church needs "to abstract from them (the passages) the timeless principles underlying them and then operate in the area of the exercise of Christian fellowship according to the basic principles." (Four p.42)

From this basic perspective of the doctrine the pamphlet continues by giving the application of these principals.

"It would be a dangerous 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." (Four p.45)

With this statement the Missouri Synod was defending its distinction between prayer fellowship and joint prayer.

They saw many levels of fellowship rather than just one. Cited is 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15. Here it is understood that Paul is not suggesting that "fraternal fellowship" be broken with this individual but only "social concourse." (ibid) The pamphlet sees the Apostle Paul teaching levels of fellowship- that different manifestations of "fellowship" call for different levels of unity.

It was certainly this understanding, as well as a zealous desire for "unity," that led the Missouri Synod into what has been labeled "unionistic" practice. Just a few examples will be needed to establish this point.

First of all, the Missouri Synod, a member of the Synodical Conference, departed from the its previous stand on fellowship which it held in the early 1930's. At this time (during the founding of the ALC) Missouri began working toward efforts for unification. They produced the Brief Statement- a paper establishing their position on fellowship as it related to doctrinal issues. However, when the ALC would not agree to this, but instead produced a doctinal Declaration- a statement with which they would really alter the meaning of the Brief Statement, the Missouri Synod still continued its move toward unity. The ultimate result was "that disagreement in certain non-fundamental doctrines need not be divisive" for fellowship.(Pless p.2)

This was born out in practice in the joint meetings that

were held between Missouri and the ALC. Though they had not reached unity on several doctrinal matters (which they were still trying to resolve) they opened the meetings with joint devotions led by the men from the various denominations. (Entrenched p.8)

Joint prayer was also practiced in other meetings as well. Irwin Habeck cites several situations in which this was true. He recalls a Missouri Synod Pastor who explained that a local service club (apparently a secular organization) of which he was a member had an opening prayer. He continued by stating that "nobody makes an issue of that anymore." (Entrenched p.23) Habeck also explains how a Missouri Synod Pastor gave the invocation at a Republican National Convention. (ibid)

However, this "unionism" even went beyond simply praying together. In 1959 the ALC's Professor H. Leupold was invited to teach during the summer session of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. When questioned by the Wisconsin Synod about the decision the Missouri representatives responded,

"We have been told the man was chosen because of his conservative witness in his own church and through his commentaries. Our joint committee after setting up proper fellowship principles should earnestly consider, whether it is necessarily a unionistic tendency in every case to have men of other Synods speak to our pastors (graduate school) on such matters..." (Report p.6)

While this last example does not primarily relate to prayer fellowship practice it does show that the Missouri practice was beginning to clearly demonstrate a breakdown in the position it once held. This example would no doubt encourage members to disregard confessional lines in their own personal practice of

fellowship and prayer fellowship.

Wisconsin's Response

With the Missouri Synod position on prayer fellowship becoming more and more contrary to the position of the Synodical Conference what was the response of the Wisconsin Synod? What did its pastors do to counteract the side effects that would no doubt affect its own members? We will briefly take a look at some doctrinal statements and subsequent practice.

To the Missouri position that there exist various levels of fellowship the Wisconsin Synod presented this statement to its 1959 convention. "Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians are united with one another." (Proceedings 1959 p.205) They explained, "Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit conception." (ibid) This "unit concept" as it came to be called explained that Scripture has not created different levels of fellowship. Either fellowship rightly exists or it does not.

In a discussion on prayer fellowship Joh. Meyer writes that the unity of the church is based upon the gospel, the Word of God. "Adulterate the Word: and at once faith is endangered, and the oneness begins to crumble." (Meyer p.248) He concludes that to heal the differences one must become united around the Word, other kinds of unity are only "sham."

Neither are there levels of fellowship, nor are there levels of error. The question is not how much disagreement exists in

the doctrines of Scripture but whether or not there is disagreement. "Error, not degree of error, settles the question." (Tract 10, p.6)

When it became clear that despite 20 years of admonition the Missouri Synod was not leaving its practice, the Wisconsin Synod formally severed fellowship ties at its thirty-sixth convention in August, 1961. It was clearly stated in the "whereas" portions of the statement that fellowship was really the key divisive factor in the whole matter. (Proceedings 1961 pp.197-198)

Once the formal severing of ties was complete then the difficult work of severing the "practical ties" ensued. This was carried out mainly in the work of the local congregation. In conversations with some local retired pastors some interesting information was disclosed.

First, as was stated earlier, the break with the Missouri Synod came as no surprise. It would appear that many congregations understood that the break was coming. In fact, Pastor Norm Engel reports that when the break actually did occur it was "anticlimatic." This was no doubt partially due to education and discussion which was initiated long before the actual split. According to Pastor Engel even the local Milwaukee paper covered the break.

During this difficult time the pastors reported that they educated the congregation with the Scriptures. Extra teaching offered in instruction class, sermons, Bible classes, the open forum, and leading by example were several ways that the pastors

explained and lived out the break in fellowship.

At the time a number of pamphlets were accessible to aid pastors in their work. Ten Tracts, a series of 10 short pamphlets explaining points of conflict between the synods, was available. Timely Topics, a brief compilation of questions addressed in The Northwestern Lutheran, explained some of the exegetical and practical questions. Entrenched Unionistic Practices offered "all individuals and groups who desire more information" (Entrenched p.2) some of the historical instances of Missouri's practice, some of which have been cited earlier in this paper.

Through this process of education it became clear to many why the Wisconsin Synod was breaking fellowship with Missouri. To others, however, it did not. As we approach the issue today we can learn much from these proceedings and from the dangers associated with this doctrinal discussion. For example, we can see the importance of maintaining the whole Scripture. Today we can learn and do something else though. We can pray that one day soon the differences may be resolved between all Christians so that as Jesus said, "all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." (John 17:21)

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