

Some Significant Positions and Decisions at the Denver Convention of the LCMS

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At the Southeastern Wisconsin District Pastor-Teacher Conference convening at Hartford, Wisconsin, June 10,11, 1969, a request was made for some type of report on the Denver Convention of the LCMS from the official Wisconsin Synod observers. The following is the effort of the undersigned observer to meet this request to the extent that the limited time at his disposal has made this possible.

Preliminary Hearings

The actual convention was preceded by a full day of open hearings by Floor Committee 3 on Church Relations. These hearings dealt with the issues of establishing fellowship with the ALC, of continuing membership in LCUSA, and of applying for membership in the LWF.

In these hearings the major portion of time was devoted to the issue of fellowship with the ALC. Those opposing a declaration of fellowship with the ALC stressed the unsound position of many ALC leaders on the nature and authority of the Holy Scriptures, the ALC's lax lodge practice, and its ecumenical relations with heterodox churches and church federations. They evaluated these matters from the viewpoint of Missouri's past Scriptural position on doctrine and practice and on this basis opposed fellowship with the ALC.

Those speaking for ALC fellowship did not spend too much time questioning and correcting what those opposing fellowship set forth as disturbing facts about the ALC. They rather viewed these facts from a different theological approach. It was the approach of a new way of reading the Scriptures and thinking of their authority, the new approach which has more recently entrenched itself in the Missouri Synod, particularly also at its seminary in St. Louis. It was the new approach to the questions of fellowship and the church's mission as set forth in the *Theology of Fellowship* and as crystallized into a synodical program in the *Mission Affirmations*, adopted at the Detroit Convention of 1965.

Instead of demanding full doctrinal unity for fellowship, those speaking in favor of fellowship with the ALC emphasized a consensus in the Gospel and in the administration of the Sacraments. Instead of holding out for agreement with all the past doctrinal statements of the LC-MS, they placed sole emphasis on a common subscription to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Instead of stressing the absolute inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures, also in all factual statements, they stressed the functional trustworthiness of the Scriptures in matters of faith and life, in the messages of Law and Gospel. They refrained from distinguishing between orthodox and heterodox churches, between weak brethren and persistent errorists. They no longer distinguished between the invisible spiritual fellowship of faith in the Holy Christian Church (*una sancta*) and the outward fellowship which is to be practiced on the basis of a common Scriptural confession. Disregarding the Scriptural "avoid" and "beware" over against persistent errorists, they maintained that Christians have an obligation to give an outward expression of fellowship in faith with all whose Christian faith is not called into question and denied. They asserted that thereby they are mutually to share their strength and to bear with one another's weaknesses. They emphasized that Lutheran Christians will endeavor to do this in their conscious commitment to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, but that in doing so they will deal with doctrinal errors and imperfections with the same spirit of patient forbearance and forgiveness with which they are expected to bear with the weaknesses and imperfections of life in fellow Christians. They stressed the great need of outward unity and fellowship to gain strength in wrestling jointly with the great social issues of the day.

A deep theological cleavage within the LCMS was therefore evident already at the preliminary open hearings. The arrangement prevailed of matching teach speaker in favor of the issue discussed with one speaking in opposition. This was accomplished by assigning separate microphones to the two sides of the issues. For this reason the relative strength of the two positions could not readily be ascertained at the open

hearings. Yet very apparent were two theological positions which cannot be reconciled or stand side-by-side in one church body if it is really to bear a common witness. These two positions remained evident throughout the convention.

The Election of the Presidium

The election of the president was carried out on Saturday, the first day of the convention. In the nominating ballot for the presidency Victor Behnken, Oliver Harms, Theodore Nickel, J.A.O. Preus, and E. C. Webber were the top five candidates. Of these, all but the incumbent were considered to be conservative candidates: This evidence of conservative strength among the voting delegates continued to show when Dr. J.A.O. Preuss received the majority of votes on the second subsequent ballot. After expressing his gratitude for having had the opportunity to serve the synod since 1962; and after introducing the president-elect and urging the synod to close its ranks and to move forward, Dr. Harms added that many serious matters had come up during his period of office, but that he had no regrets for the important actions that he had taken, and that he continued to stand also by the recommendation of establishing fellowship with the ALC.

The margin of convention votes by which Dr. Preus had been elected was not made known. On the subsequent Monday evening Dr. Roland Wiederaenders was elected first vice president. He had been definitely classified with Dr. Harms as representing and supporting the liberal position in the main controversial issues. This seemed to indicate that the initial majority of conservative votes had in the meantime been lost through various activities and presentations in and off the convention floor. The subsequent elections of Theodore Nickel, Victor Behnken, and E. C. Webber as second, third, and fourth vice presidents, all spoken of as conservatives, again showed a resurgence of conservative voting strength. This was not true of the final election of Paul Streuffert as the fifth vice president. The election of officers in a church body always involves a division. Yet in a united church body it is a division of judgment as to who by gifts and experience can best carry through a commonly held position. For the most part, the division in these elections was a division on theological positions, though there was obviously a segment of voters who could be influenced and who wavered in their decisions. It seemed apparent however, that a large segment of voting delegates had given Dr. Preus the mandate of leading the Missouri Synod back to its former historic Scriptural position in doctrine and practice.

Fellowship with the ALC

Before the close of the Wednesday evening session, July 16, the convention voted by ballot on Resolution 3-15 of the Floor Committee on Church Relations, which proposed altar and pulpit fellowship with the ALC. A minority report, signed by ten members of the forty-six man committee and advocating further study of the issue, was merely read for purpose of information. Only the majority report was discussed, and all who spoke from the floor in this evening session before the previous question was called expressed themselves in favor of fellowship with the ALC.

By this time the convention delegates had heard addresses and statements from many prominent individuals, all of which encouraged the establishment of fellowship with the ALC. Space permits us to call attention only to a selection. Dr. Fredrik A. Schiotz, President of the ALC, spoke on Monday. He pointed out that the 18 District Conventions of the ALC had approved fellowship with the LCMS by a 94.7% vote. "If you accept our proffered hand, we will accept it as God's gift to our people. If you do not find it in your hearts to do that, many of our people will ask, 'Is God's Spirit pointing us in new directions?'" He stated that knowing the ache in their own hearts when the WELS and the ELS had rejected their fellowship, the Missouri Synod would understand the ache in the heart of the ALC if their offer of fellowship was rejected. In answer to the specific question addressed to him whether his church body could be prevailed upon to wait for two or four further years for Missouri's decision, he stated that this was a vary difficult question to answer but that he would have to say that many in his synod were impatient.

Dr. Robert Marshall, President of the LCA, spoke on Tuesday forenoon. He noted several elements which already bound their two churches together, such as prayer fellowship, baptism, the Ecumenical Creeds,

the Lutheran Confessions, and the power of the Gospel. He said that they had not yet found it possible to acknowledge their confirmation and ordination. "If we Lutherans disagree, we should be able to do so as brothers, not as enemies, nor as strangers." He declared that LCMS fellowship with the AN would also create a friendlier atmosphere between Missouri and the LCA.

Dr. John Kovac, President of the SELC (Slovak Synod) (a resolution had been adopted on Saturday to effect the merger of this former Synodical Conference body with the LC-MS by which it would become a non-geographical district): He stated that it had been generally acknowledged that there was a consensus in the Gospel among the three church bodies QC-MS, SELC, and ALC). Concerning the demand for total unity in doctrine and practice as a prerequisite for fellowship, he asserted: "There would be no end of fragmentation of the visible church of Christ if we consistently pressed that principle."

Dr. J.A.O. Preus, the President-Elect, spoke shortly before the vote was taken. He voiced concern particularly for the Word of God, saying that he favored a delay to give an opportunity for further study of this subject. However, he was not ready to tell them how they should vote, and promised to abide by the decision of this convention and use strenuous efforts to draw all Lutherans into a consensus of fellowship.

Kenneth Steege, youth representative and spokesman. (It was a prominent feature of the convention that youth representatives, young men and women, had been officially invited from the various districts—and were given opportunity to speak from the podium on all the various vital issues before the convention.) He spoke impassionately, quoting Drs. Schiotz, Marshall, and Kovac, in support of youth's ardent desire for the establishment of fellowship with the ALC.

Dr. Richard Caemmerer, the convention essayist, in presenting the first of four sections of *The Edifying Word* on Monday morning, expressed himself in favor of fellowship with the ALC.

When during the Thursday morning session the 961 votes cast on the evening before were counted, it revealed that one blank vote, 522 for a declaration of fellowship, and 438 votes against were cast. The approval was by a margin of 84 votes. The decision was treated as a matter of judgment rather than as a matter of conscience. By all indications, however, the division of votes expressed not a divided judgment on facts concerning the ALC, but a radical cleavage in theological position and approach on the part of the voters. Attached to this report is the full text of the resolution establishing fellowship with the ALC.

In correlated notion taken after to brief debate, the convention approved fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, which was formerly an ALC district. The Lutheran Church—Canada, which comprises the Missouri Synod's three Canadian districts, had recommended this fellowship declaration. The resolution approving the establishment of fellowship was adopted with the amendment that this approval of fellowship be prefaced by the same preamble which had been used in the resolution approving fellowship with the ALC in the USA. This action was followed by an additional resolution authorizing The Lutheran Church—Canada to "pursue the quest for Lutheran unity with The Lutheran Church in America—Canada section."

LCUSA

On Tuesday afternoon, even before the issue of fellowship with the ALC was decided, it had been resolved "that the LCMS thank God for the blessings bestowed on His church through LCUSA." and "that the Synod continue to participate in LCUSA," also "that the Synod inform its congregations more fully about the programs and activities of LCUSA." These resolutions were adopted with a sizable majority. Even many of the conservatives seemed to lack awareness of the fact that this membership involved violation of the same Scriptural fellowship principles "hick underlay their opposition to LWF membership. Also Dr. Preus evidenced no objections to continued membership in LCUSA.

At a later date a resolution was passed which stated that "whereas, it would be desirable that the Lutheran churches in LCUSA express a common witness against unchristian and anti-christian organizations, therefore, he it resolved, that we ask our commissioners to LCUSA to request the Council to initiate and promote an educational program in tie Lutheran bodies belonging to the Council, presenting the Lutheran witness against such organizations."

Another resolution of the convention on the Synod's position concerning lodges states "that the President of the Synod appoint a committee to study, in consultation with the Commission on Fraternal Organizations the whole matter of the pastoral approach to the lodge question and make recommendations, including Handbook changes, if needed, to the next convention of the Synod."

Social Action

A single board, combining the concern of social welfare and world relief was authorized. This new unit will be called the Board of Social Ministry and World Relief. A great deal of time and attention at the convention was devoted to social problems and social welfare, especially the problems of racism and world hunger.

Pastor Willie L. Perzfeld of Oakland, California, gave a presentation in behalf of black Lutheran clergymen. He presented six demands of the black Lutherans, which included giving top priority to the expansion needs of Alabama Lutheran Academy and College at Selma, Alabama, and inaugurating a massive education program aimed at white people and designed to eliminate racism. Provision was subsequently made for an appropriation of up to one million dollars for capital improvement of the Selma school. This was the only major capital investment appropriation at the Synod's educational institutions.

A *Statement of Principle on Social Action* was presented and approved to serve as a general preface or various resolutions dealing with social problems. In this preface the distinction between Christ's kingdom and the political kingdom as defined in the *Lutheran Confessions* was set forth. He felt, however, that a confusion was introduced by way of application it was stated: "When the Synod concerns itself with the Word of God and the call to proclaim it, it is dealing with what the Confessions call 'the kingdom of Christ.' When the Synod directs its activities to questions of social ministry and social action, it is responding not only to the call of love, but to the call to Christians to participate fully in the 'secular' or 'political kingdom.' These two types of response cannot really be separated for the Christian remains one person, and his ministry must be to the whole man and even to the whole society of men, as the *Mission Affirmations* state.

The confusion consists in this that the distinction is not upheld between what the Christian does as a member of the church, also through a Synod as a working form of the church, and what the individual Christian does with his Christian motivation and insights supplied by the church as a member of the state and of human society. Hereby the mission of a confessional synod functioning as church is widened beyond the mission which Christ gave to His church. Hence the very confusion of the two kingdoms is brought about which the Lutheran Confessions sought to prevent with their clear distinction between the two kingdoms, first of all, as to their respective function, and then as to their respective means, the Word of God on the one hand, and human reason on the other. This confusion was already introduced by, the document, *The Mission Affirmations*, adopted by the Detroit Convention of the LCMS in 1965. It is very noteworthy that this document *The Mission Affirmations* was mentioned, alluded to, or quoted in a great many resolutions of the Denver convention. It is a document which merits our careful study and evaluation, if we want to understand the liberal spokesmen of the LCMS with respect to fellowship practice and the mission of the church.

The Position of Women in the Work of the Church

The Denver Convention resolved that the LCMS accept the following declarations as guides in this matter:

"1. These statements of Scripture which direct women to keep silent in the church, and which prohibit them to teach and to exercise authority over men, are understood to mean that women ought not to hold the pastoral office or serve in any other capacity involving the distinctive functions of this office.

2. The principles set forth in such passages, we believe, prohibit holding any other kind of office or membership on boards or committees in the institutional structures of a congregation only if this involves women in a violation of the order of creation. We hold that they do not prohibit full

membership of women on synodical boards, commissions, and committees. The manner of filling an office or establishing membership on a board or commission, in congregations or in the Synod, has no prohibitory Scriptural implications.

3. We hold likewise that Scripture does not prohibit women from exercising the franchise in congregational or synodical assemblies.

4. We, therefore, conclude that the Synod itself and the congregations of the Synod are at liberty to alter their policies and practices in regard to women's involvement in the work of the church according to these declarations, provided the polity developed conforms to the general Scriptural principles that women neither hold the pastoral office nor 'exercise authority over men.'

One is indeed pleased that the Scriptural principle is upheld that the order of creation is not to be set aside and that hence women in their activity are not to exercise authority over men. Yet how can this principle be upheld amidst the new functions and activities which this resolution in a very general way opens up for women in the church?

Lutheran World Federation

On Monday, the second day of the Convention, Committee 3 on Church Relations submitted a resolution that the convention instruct the Synod's president to make application for membership in the Lutheran World Federation. This was based on the premise expressed in a whereas "that the nature, function, and scope of the Lutheran World Federation according to its revised constitution of 1963 afford the LCMS an opportunity to add its voice to the witness of Confessional Lutheranism to the Christian community and to the world as an implementation of the Mission Affirmations adopted by the Synod in 1965." Vital was also the additional whereas that "the thorough study of the doctrinal basis of the Lutheran World Federation by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations revealed no Biblical or Confessional obstacle to membership."

When this resolution was taken up for action on the convention floor on Friday, the final day of the Convention, the spokesman introduced by the committee chairman explained that the committee had in the meantime devoted a great deal of further discussion to this resolution, taking note of the measure of disunity evident among the delegates concerning fellowship issues. Hence they considered it wise to distinguish between two matters in this resolution, the one, that there was nothing in this recommended application for membership in the Lutheran World Federation which militated against Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, and the other matter whether it would be good judgment for the Synod to make application for LWF membership at this time. The spokesman suggested that the Synod affirm the first matter and postpone the second. The Executive Secretary of CTCR expressed himself ready to go along with this distinction. Dr. Preus, the President-elect, asked the body to decline this resolution because fellowship with the ALC had been approved with such a small margin. A lay member pointed to the high cost of Lutheran World Federation membership. Though the basic membership fee would be \$100,000, the complete cost in 1968 to the ALC and the LCA had been two million plus. This cost was put into relation with the needs of allaying world hunger repeatedly stressed at the convention. President Reimitz of the Brazil District called attention to the fact that his district was 99% against LWF membership. After various proposed amendments did not gain favor, the previous question was called, so that a ballot vote was taken on the resolution as a whole. Of the 892 votes cast 272 were in favor, 620 against applying for LWF membership at this time.

In view of the great variety of arguments adduced to advise against application for LWF membership at this time, it would be difficult to evaluate this vote as a conservative victory, by which the LWF membership was declined as a matter of Scriptural principle.

We hope that this report, which has merely selected six prominent items and undertaken to report in full detail on what was without doubt considered the most vital item, the declaration of fellowship with the ALC, will be of some service to those who have requested such a report.

The Resolution of the LCMS Approving Fellowship With The ALC
[July 16, 1969]

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Preamble:

As we consider altar and pulpit fellowship with The American Lutheran Church, we do well to state clearly what we mean when we use the term, "fellowship," particularly in the context of relationships between church bodies.

"We understand that fellowship between church bodies is based on a common and mutual acceptance, understanding and practice of the Gospel one the sacraments, understanding the term "Gospel" as it is used in the *Augsburg Confession*, Article VII. (*Augsburg Confession*, Article V, which speaks of the Gospel and sacraments as instruments of the Holy Spirit for the creation of faith, is helpful toward understanding the meaning of "Gospel" in *Augsburg Confession*, Article VII.) Where such agreement and understanding exists between church bodies, they may and should establish altar and pulpit fellowship.

"With the establishment of fellowship each church body retains its separate identity and organizational structure, procedures and policies. It is understood that the declaration of fellowship will not infringe upon or interfere with the rights of congregations and church bodies to determine their exercise of pastoral care and discipline. However, also in this respect church bodies in fellowship should earnestly work toward a common approach and practice in such matters. There must exist between such church bodies a mutual trust that congregational and synodical regulations in governing and expression and exercise of pastoral care will be recognized and respected by all concerned.

"A congregation of one church body may call as its pastor a clergyman of the other church body, provided that prior consultation has resulted in mutual approval by the respective administrative officials of both church bodies involved in such a call. The establishment of fellowship does not imply the indiscriminate calling of pastors across synodical lines. A congregation and its pastor shall belong to the same church body and be subject to the discipline of that church body.

"Where fellowship exists between church bodies, this will express itself in various ways:

1. Pastors in good standing in each church body may be invited to preach from the pulpits of congregations of the other church body.
2. Congregations of church bodies in fellowship may hold joint worship services.
3. Members of the congregations of each church body, who are in good standing in their own congregation and do not violate principles regulating communion practices in the host congregation, shall be welcome as guests at the altar of congregations of the other church body. In the interest of the pastoral care and responsibility of the congregation of which an individual is a member, there should not be an indiscriminate visiting of the altars of churches either within his own church body or at the altars of congregations of that church body with which his church is in fellowship.
4. Members in good standing may transfer their membership from a congregation of one church body to a congregation of the other church body in conformity with the practices of the receiving congregation."

(Statement accepted in substance by the national and district presidents of both The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod at a joint meeting in Minneapolis, February 25-26, 1969)

With this understanding, we offer the following resolution:

1. WHEREAS, According to the Scriptures, Christian fellowship is the gracious gift of God and signifies a fellowship in Christ and in the Gospel which calls upon Christians to confess their one Lord with one mind and one voice and to live together in unity and mutual assistance; and
2. WHEREAS, The Lutheran Confessions declare that: “It is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word.” (*Augsburg Confession* VII); and
3. WHEREAS, This statement in the *Augsburg Confession* VII defines the necessary and sufficient basis for fellowship, and turns our eyes to the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; and this Gospel makes us Christians, builds the church, and holds the church together amid so many forces which seek to tear it apart; and
4. WHEREAS, Our church looks to *Augsburg Confession* VII for instruction and guidance with respect to sound Biblical and Lutheran principles for the establishment of pulpit and altar fellowship with The American Lutheran Church (cf. Fred Kramer, *The Fellowship Principle According to Augustana VII*, p. 3); and
5. WHEREAS, The New York Convention, 1967, adopted resolution 3-23,
“Resolved, That the Synod recognize that the Scriptural and confessional basis for altar and pulpit fellowship between The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and The American Lutheran Church exists, that the Synod proceed to take the necessary steps toward full realization of altar and pulpit fellowship with The American Lutheran Church, and that the Synod invite the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches to join with us in the same”; and
6. WHEREAS, Since the New York Convention many meetings have been held within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and in conjunction with members of The American Lutheran Church, for the purpose of discussing the issues of altar and pulpit fellowship; and
7. WHEREAS, The Recommendation of the President and Council of Presidents on American Lutheran Fellowship, states: “Our prolonged study and discussion has produced the conviction that we agree in the preaching of the Gospel ‘in conformity with a pure understanding of it’ and in ‘the administration of the sacraments according to the divine Word.’ Our discussions have led us to the conviction that we are in the tradition of true Lutherans who are committed to the Holy Scriptures and who subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions. We are persuaded that we share a mutual desire to strengthen a united evangelical proclamation and to develop a consistently evangelical practice (CW, p. 94); and
8. WHEREAS, The convention of The American Lutheran Church (Omaha, 1968) has resolved to be in fellowship with The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod; and
9. WHEREAS, The Holy Spirit has led us to recognize this agreement in the Gospel so that we may confidently look for further blessings and benefits upon our churches as they manifest their fellowship (*Joint Statement and Declaration*); therefore be it

- a) Resolved, That the Synod express gratitude to God for creating this unity among us and we beseech Him to increase our awareness of this great gift; and be it further
- b) Resolved, That with joy and praise to God the Synod herewith formally declare itself to be in altar and pulpit fellowship with The American Lutheran Church; and be it further
- c) Resolved, That the Synod reiterate the pledge made in the *Joint Statement and Declaration* to seek a unified evangelical position and practice on the basis of our commitment to the Gospel; that to this end the Synod propose the creation of an intersynodical commission to assist in the proper understanding and practice of fellowship, to supply counsel and aid as a support to the pastoral ministries carried on in the synods and to suggest appropriate means by which the members of our synods may grow in their understanding and practice of fellowship; and be it further
- d) Resolved, That the Synod authorize its president, in consultation with the president of The American Lutheran Church, to announce the establishment of altar and pulpit fellowship between their respective church bodies and to make suggestions for the appropriate implementation of the worthy purposes of this declaration; and be it further
- e) Resolved, That the Synod thank the officers, pastors, and congregations of the American Lutheran Church for their many acts of courtesy and kindness toward us and especially for their willingness to meet with us for doctrinal discussions; and be it finally
- f) Resolved, That the Synod commit itself to the following:

Conclusion:

We, the members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, rejoice over the existing unity of faith and confession, as stated in the doctrinal position of The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and we embrace the opportunities and assume the obligations of altar and pulpit fellowship. Recognizing that because of our sinfulness and human frailties there remain imperfections in faith and understanding of the riches of God’s grace, as well as failings in life and practice consistent with the Gospel, we pledge ourselves to draw these and all other problems affecting our relationships into the perspective of God’s grace as revealed in the divine Word and deal with them within that framework. We pledge ourselves always to have a tender regard for each others’ consciences any to stand by each other in mutual sympathy and understanding, forbearance and love.

As members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, committed to the Holy Gospel, we obligate ourselves to continued study and discussion, always remembering that we, in the love of Christ, must “bear one another’s burdens ‘and so fulfill the law of Christ’” (Gal. 6:2).