

A Brief Factual Presentation Of The Historical Development Of Efforts Toward Lutheran Unity In The U. S. A.

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In outlining efforts toward the establishment of Lutheran unity we limit our observations chiefly to the synods of the Middle-West which were founded around the middle of the last century.

1. *Ohio*, although organized in 1818 by Lutherans who had crossed the Allegheny Mountains before 1800 and soon thereafter, belongs in this group because it attained its conservative Lutheran position through the influence of pastors who had left Germany in the thirties and forties of the last century to minister to the spiritual needs of the ever-growing numbers of German Lutherans who settled in Ohio and adjacent states. On Pfarrer Loehe's advice most of these pastors sought membership in the Ohio Synod. Although they, under the leadership of Dr. W. Siehler, soon withdrew from Ohio and made common cause with the Saxons in Missouri, their testimony in the interest of confessional Lutheranism was not in vain. In 1848, the Ohio Synod voted for unconditional acceptance of all the Confessions of the Lutheran Church as a prerequisite for membership.
2. *Buffalo* was founded in 1845. It consisted of Lutherans who, under the leadership of Pastor J. A. A. Grabau and a few other pastors, had left their homeland in 1839, because they opposed the Prussian Union which endeavored to merge Lutherans and Reformed into the Evangelical Church of Prussia.
3. *Missouri* was founded in 1847. It comprised the Saxon congregations in Missouri, those served by Loehe missionaries in Ohio and Michigan, and others gathered or served by Pastor F. C. D. Wyneken. This synod is itself the result of efforts toward Lutheran unity which induced men in widely separated communities to band themselves together as a synod in testimony of their common faith and confession.
4. *Wisconsin* was founded in 1850 by emissaries of the Langenberg Society in Germany. Most of them had been trained in the school of the Barmen Mission Society, and all were working in Milwaukee and vicinity. Although accepting The Lutheran Confessions, the synod maintained close relations with their German friends of Langenberg and Barmen for a number of years. Not only that, but it also practiced fellowship and served Christians not of the Lutheran Faith during the first years of its existence.
5. *Iowa* was organized in 1854 by emissaries of Pfarrer Wilhelm Loehe of Neuendettelsau in Bavaria. Loehe, with his warm heart for the welfare of the Lutheran Church in America, hoped Iowa would steer a middle-course between Buffalo and Missouri and would then be able to mediate between these two Lutheran church bodies.

The Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints, is but one. All that believe in the God-man Jesus Christ and His redemptive work are its members, none other. This faith which is a matter of the heart unites all believers in a very real sense. Although this union is not tangible and cannot be seen, the Church which the Bible calls the body of Christ is so firmly planted that nothing is able to destroy it in time and eternity. The Church is altogether the work of God the Holy Ghost who has made us members of it through faith which He creates in men through the Gospel. We cannot but confess the faith that is within us by word of mouth and by conducting ourselves as children of God in this world. Thus we became recognizable to others. As the members of the physical body are joined together in mutual service for the benefit of the whole body, so we as members of Christ's spiritual body are striving to establish fraternal relations with other Christians for mutual benefit.

In accordance with these Scriptural principles the Lutherans that had recently emigrated to this country approached each other and also endeavored to get in contact with other Lutherans whose forebears had come to this country generations ago.

Efforts at Establishing Unity between the Lutheran Synods of this Country during the Last Century

A. To 1872

The history of these church bodies presents indeed on the surface a picture of constant strife and controversy. But a careful observation should teach us that the continuing strife over doctrinal differences is in itself an indication that these men earnestly endeavored to come to an understanding with each other, that they were sincerely striving to reach confessional unity. To reach that goal, they were not afraid to set forth their convictions both through the spoken and printed word, and frankly to bring out the points at issue between them. A brief survey of the history of the Lutheran synods founded a century ago will prove the correctness of the foregoing statements.

1. Before either Buffalo or Missouri had been organized, Pastor Grabau in 1840 issued a Pastoral Letter (*Hirtenbrief*), a copy of which he sent to the Saxons in Missouri under the address of Pastor G. H. Loeber. The Saxons, however, were at that time not in a position to give a considered opinion on its contents. They were then in the midst of a deep spiritual struggle in their own midst in regard to the doctrines of the Church and the Ministry. Only after this struggle had somewhat subsided in consequence of the Altenburg Debate in 1843, Pastor Loehe wrote in a friendly letter to Pastor Grabau, his Pastoral Letter contained some doctrinal statements with which the Saxon pastors could not agree. Grabau took exception to this criticism. More correspondence served to bring out those doctrinal differences more clearly. When letters and articles in the church papers (Buffalo's *Informatorium* and Missouri's *Der Lutheraner*) did not achieve the desired result, efforts ensued to arrange for an oral discussion in a conference between the two parties. As early as 1846 Missouri invited Grabau to Fort Wayne for that purpose, but met with Grabau's refusal for reasons of conscience. When in 1856 Ohio men in discussions with Missouri pastors mentioned this deplorable disagreement of two churches which both claimed full allegiance to the Lutheran Confessions, Missouri again voiced its desire to come to an understanding with Buffalo. In 1859 Buffalo ended all farther conciliatory attempts by declaring the Missouri Synod as being heathenish and publican.

2. Men of the General Synod, since 1820 a Federation of older synods in the East, attacked Missouri in their church papers for its confessionalism, and Missouri did not fail to answer publicly. That also in this instance the goal of reaching doctrinal unity was not forgotten, is evident by the fact that Missouri representatives met men from the New York and Pennsylvania Ministeriums of the General Synod as well as men of the Ohio Synod from 1856 to 1859 in free conferences. In the words of Professor Walther, these conferences were proposed with a view toward the final realization of one united Evangelical Lutheran Church of North America.

3. Iowa, as mentioned above, was founded by emissaries of Loehe. The latter's interest in Missouri had cooled because of the uncompromising stand Missouri took against Buffalo in the doctrine of the Church and the Ministry. No wonder that Iowa soon squared off against Missouri. We are not entering into a discussion of the differences between the two synods. Suffice it to call to mind that other divergences soon became apparent, for instance, Iowa's claim that church fellowship should not be denied to men because they express divergent opinions in doctrines which do not destroy the foundation of saving faith, as that of Sunday and in the field of eschatology such as the first resurrection preceding the general resurrection of the dead on Judgment Day, and the Antichrist. The colloquy, for which representation of both synods met in Milwaukee in 1867, did not end in

an agreement in the points discussed, did not bring about mutual recognition because Missouri could not be swayed from its firm position that without full doctrinal unity church fellowship was impossible.

4. Wisconsin had in 1867, after much hesitation, definitely severed its fellowship relations to its German benefactors, and had cleared itself from any suspicion of unionistic practices. When in 1868 a committee of this synod met with representatives of Missouri, full agreement in doctrine and practice was reached. Mutual recognition and a declaration of church fellowship followed.

5. The General Council, which was organized in 1867 in protest against the lax position of the General Synod, disappointed the hopes of many staunch Lutherans by refusing to take a clear stand in the questions of altar and pulpit fellowship, of lodge membership, and of chiliasm. Hence, Missouri, Ohio and the Norwegian Synod refused to join, Wisconsin and Minnesota soon withdrew.

6. Ohio, which through the years had come to an ever clearer appreciation of orthodox Lutheran confessionalism, also found itself in complete doctrinal agreement with Missouri. Fraternal recognition and church fellowship between the two was achieved in 1868.

7. The Norwegian Synod, which for some time had been in contact with Missouri, likewise declared itself in complete agreement with the Missouri Synod, which at that time was conceded to be the champion of Lutheran orthodoxy by friend and foe.

8. In 1871, at the invitation of the Joint Synod of Ohio, representatives of Ohio, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois (soon absorbed by Missouri) and of the Norwegian Synod met twice to consider the advisability of a closer union along strictly confessional lines in the interest of Lutheran unity. In July 1872, the above named synods together with the Minnesota Synod organized the Ev. Luth. Synodical Conference of North America as a federation of independent synods and held its first convention in St. Johns Church in Milwaukee. Truly a God-pleasing union, for it had been reached without jeopardizing the divine truth in any manner. Membership requirement is complete adherence to the Lutheran Confessions. One of the purposes of the Synodical Conference is to unite all Lutheran synods of America into one orthodox Lutheran Church.

B. From 1872 to 1932

A difference regarding the doctrines of Election and Conversion within the Synodical Conference which, despite repeated attempts, could not be adjusted through private conferences and thus threatened to disrupt the harmony of its constituent synods, was brought into the open by the action of Professor F. A. Schmidt of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, a member of the Norwegian Synod. He publicly accused Missouri of Crypto-Calvinism. Professor Stelhorn and others of the Missouri Synod took his part, as did prominent men in the Ohio Synod. Ohio resigned from the Synodical Conference in 1881. Wisconsin and Minnesota sided with Missouri; so did the Norwegian Synod. However, in 1883, it also withdrew as a member of the Synodical Conference for internal reasons while remaining in fellowship with its member synods. Iowa and the other Lutheran bodies of our country agreed with Ohio, as did the Lutheran Churches of Europe. Attacked from all sides, Missouri, Wisconsin, and Minnesota were the more closely welded together in the fire of the abuse and vilification heaped upon them, the more persecution they had to endure. The church papers of the various synods in the two last decades of the nineteenth century abounded with doctrinal articles in defense of their own and with attacks on the views of the opposition. In effect, it was the age-old war over the question whether it is the grace of God in Christ alone which saves or whether human cooperation in some form is required. As bitter as this controversy waxed, who would dare to deny that the opponents were contending in the interest of unity in the Lutheran Church!

It was undoubtedly the yearning for Lutheran unity which brought about the big Free Conferences at the beginning of this century, which were open to all men of the Lutheran Faith. They afforded an excellent opportunity to see face to face and hear the protagonists of the various Lutheran camps. Five of these meetings were held between 1903 and 1906 before they were abandoned. The spokesmen and their audiences were persuaded that a continuation would not materially contribute toward attaining the goal of Lutheran unity.

In 1912, the Norwegian Synod and the United Norwegian Lutheran Church reached an agreement by adopting the Madison Theses, a document which the synods of the Synodical Conference correctly evaluated as unionistic and therefore repudiated. In 1917, a merger was effected between the United Norwegian Lutheran Church, the Norwegian Synod and the Hauge Synod under the name: The Norwegian Lutheran Church of America (now the Evangelical Lutheran Church). A small number of pastors and congregations refused to join and constituted themselves in 1918 as The Norwegian Synod of the American Lutheran Church. It joined the Synodical Conference in 1920.

Not only among the Norwegians but also among the Lutherans of German ancestry, the approach of the Quadricentennial of the Reformation saw a revival of efforts to bring about a union between the several separate Lutheran bodies in our country. In the Middle West, especially in Minnesota, a number of pastors began to meet with more or less regularity for a discussion of the controversial doctrines which for decades had held apart Lutherans who professed full acceptance of all the Lutheran Confessions as a true exposition of the Biblical truth. Upon their urging; their respective synods took action in 1917. Since 1918 committees of Missouri and Wisconsin on the one hand and of Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo on the other met twice or three times a year for a thorough discussion of the doctrines which for so many years had been in controversy between them. After ten years of deliberation these committees reported to their synods in a document known as the Intersynodical or Chicago Theses. The Missouri convention of 1929 rejected them as being insufficient and incomplete to serve as a basis for doctrinal agreement.

The same convention authorized a committee to set forth in clear and unequivocal language, which the Christian layman can understand, what the faith and confession of the Missouri Synod is, especially in the doctrines so long at issue in the Lutheran Church. The result was the *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* which by resolution of the 1932 Convention became the recognized doctrinal declaration of the Missouri Synod. Although it was not officially submitted to the sister synods of the Synodical Conference and therefore not put to a vote by them, it was silently approved and accepted.

Before entering upon a consideration of further efforts to effect Lutheran unity, the following must be appended.

The United Lutheran Church came into being in 1918 and is at present the largest group of Lutherans in America. It is a merger of the General Synod, the General Council and the United Synod in the South. A closer organizational union between these three church bodies, not necessarily in the form of a merger, could be foreseen by a watchful observer. For they had been cooperating for many years not only in externals but in work which was obviously lying in the spiritual field. However, the Swedish Augustana Synod, the largest body in the General Council, refrained from joining. Ohio, although invited, refused to join. Iowa, which for many years had maintained fraternal relations with the General Council, likewise did not enter the merger.

In 1930, the year after Missouri had rejected the Chicago Theses, the Synods of Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo merged under the name: The American Lutheran Church (ALC). In the same year the American Lutheran Church, the Norwegian Lutheran Church, the Augustana Synod, the Lutheran Free Church, and the United Danish Lutheran Church formed a federation known as The American Lutheran Conference.

C. From 1932

A few years passed after the 1932 acceptance and publication of the *Brief Statement* by the Missouri Synod before a new attempt to bring about a union of the Lutheran synods was made in 1935. The American Lutheran Church extended an invitation to Missouri to participate in consultations on the feasibility of entering into altar and pulpit fellowship with each other. In compliance with this wish, Missouri appointed a committee

for that purpose which was to meet with a corresponding committee of the ALC When the Missourians felt obligated to insist on basing the discussions on the *Brief Statement*, the ALC men came with a lengthy *Declaration* of their own. At its convention in 1938, Missouri offered to vitally interested people especially those of the sister synods in the Synodical Conference, as a basis for future church fellowship two or rather three documents: The *Brief Statement*, the ALC *Declaration*, and the report of the Convention Committee. In its Sandusky resolutions in the fall of the same year the ALC declared among other things: It is neither possible nor necessary to agree in all non-fundamental doctrines; furthermore, the American Lutheran Church will not give up its membership in the American Lutheran Conference. Finally, the relation of the *Declaration* and the *Brief Statement* to each other was clarified by the coining of the phrase: The *Brief Statement* viewed in the light of our *Declaration*.

Wisconsin warned Missouri through a resolution of the 1939 convention to desist from further negotiations with the ALC until this Church has taken a clear and unequivocal position respecting the Scriptures, but Missouri did not heed our warning. And since 1939, our synod has not ceased to warn and admonish our sister synod with monotonous though tragic regularity. There had been so many demands made on the two synods (apparently almost, if not completely ready to pronounce the establishment of church fellowship) to show in one document what the doctrinal agreement is on the basis of which they will henceforth go hand in hand, that the two brought out one single document, *The Doctrinal Affirmation*, in 1944. It was not well received anywhere, and the ALC rejected it in 1946 by resolution.

The spirit animating the ALC is easily discernible in a resolution passed at the 1942 convention and reported by the Missouri Committee to the 1944 convention. In it the ALC declared itself ready to establish pulpit and altar fellowship with either the Missouri Synod or the United Lutheran Church in America, or with both, on the basis of the Pittsburgh Agreement, the *Brief Statement* in the light of the *Declaration*, and its own *Declaration*. And in 1947, it declared itself unwilling to keep on formulating doctrinal statements. It spoke of a “wholesome and allowable latitude of theological opinion on the basis of the teachings of the Word of God.” If this is not unionism, what is it?

However, the committees of the two church bodies tried again and wrote a document known as the *Common Confession*. In 1950, Missouri adopted it at the Milwaukee convention as an adequate settlement of former doctrinal controversies on the doctrines treated therein. Our warnings had again been disregarded. The American Lutheran Church did likewise accept it.

Wisconsin’s Stand with Respect to the Negotiations Between ALC and Missouri

Quotations from the report of the Floor Committee on Church Union to the Watertown Convention of our Synod in August of this year will clearly show our attitude. “In 1939, our Synod rejected the doctrinal statement (three documents) agreed upon by the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church as a basis for possible union. At its convention in Fort Wayne in 1941 the Missouri Synod refused to withdraw the 1938 resolutions. Since our Watertown Convention in 1939, “we have repeatedly requested the Missouri Synod and its officials to suspend negotiations with the American Lutheran Church leading toward union with that body until the ALC itself relinquishes its position that there is an area of *wholesome* and *allowable* difference of opinion in matters of doctrine, and that complete agreement in doctrine is not necessary for union.”

When, in accordance to Synodical Conference regulations, Missouri submitted the *Common Confession* to us for approval, “in conference, District Synod meetings, and Joint Synod meetings our Synod studied the *Common Confession*, offered its criticisms, and unanimously rejected it at New Ulm in 1951 as inadequate to settle the doctrinal differences that had separated members of the Synodical Conference from members of the American Lutheran Church. Our objections went unheeded. The Missouri Synod on the contrary had resolved: ‘That we rejoice and thank God that the *Common Confession* shows that agreement has been achieved in the doctrines treated by the two committees.’ ” “The Missouri Synod has consistently declined to retreat from its position on the *Common Confession*, has persisted in carrying forward its negotiations with the ALC in spite of our pleas, and at Houston in June of this year, 1953, while asking its Praesidium to continue to ‘take the steps

necessary to bring about a God-pleasing disposition of the matters' mentioned in our Synods memorial, it at the same Convention resolved to continue its discussions with the representatives of the American Lutheran Church.' ”

“The net result of the Missouri Synod’s resolutions made at Houston is that action on the *Common Confession* and Part II of that *Confession* has been postponed until 1956 at the earliest. In the meantime negotiations with the American Lutheran Church will continue in spite of our pleas and criticisms.”

Our Synod assembled on October 8 and 9 in Bethesda Church, Milwaukee, in continuation of the Watertown Convention in August passed some resolutions pertaining to our relation to the Missouri Synod. Among them, are the following:

Resolved:

1. That we declare that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

- a) by reaffirming its acceptance of the *Common Confession* as a “settlement of past differences which are in fact not settled” (Proc. 1951, page 146), and
- b) by its persistent adherence to its unionistic practices
..... has 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.

4. That we prevail upon the President of the Synodical conference to arrange a program for the convention in 1954 that would devote all its regular sessions to a thorough consideration of our declaration in Point 1 and of the doctrinal issues involved.

6. That while during the period up to the next meeting of the Synodical Conference we in view of President Behnken’s offer, still anxiously and prayerfully await an indication that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod will not persist in its present stand as set forth in Point 1, we remain in a state of confession.