

THE ORTHODOX LUTHERAN CONFERENCE
AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WISCONSIN SYNOD

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The Orthodox Lutheran Conference would not at first seem to merit a great amount of attention. At its height it formally consisted of about a dozen pastors and an equal number of small parishes. Yet this small group did play an important role among the Lutherans of the Synodical Conference in the 1950's. This small group was the first to make the final decision to suspend fellowship with the Missouri Synod. This small group served as a constant reminder that the Missouri Synod was moving away from its former confessional stance.

Our study will be confined to the relationship that the Orthodox Lutheran Conference (OLC) had with the Wisconsin Synod. As the author began his study of this relationship, the doctrine of church and ministry seemed to be a very important element in the difficulties between the OLC and Wisconsin. However, after further study it became clear that the doctrine of church and ministry was not the central issue. In this study we will see that there were differences on the church and ministry question, but that the question of fellowship was the primary reason that there were not closer relations between the OLC and the Wisconsin Synod.

I. Invitation to Fellowship

In June, 1950, the convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod took action which would eventually cause the formation of the OLC. In that Milwaukee Convention the "Common Confession" was accepted as a doctrinal statement by which the old American Lutheran Church and Missouri could declare confessional unity. It was resolved and accepted by the convention that "we accept the 'Common Confession' as a statement of these doctrines in harmony with Scripture."¹

This was not a unanimous decision of the convention by any means. There are many memorials to this convention pointing out the errors of this confession. Among those submitting these memorials are some of the men who just a year later would form the OLC: Dr. P.E. Kretzmann, Pastor George Schweikert, Pastor Wallace H. McLaughlin, and Pastor H.D. Mensing.²

Some of these men were members of the St. Louis Study Club. This was a group of Missouri Synod men who originally gathered because of a common concern about the St. Louis Seminary's faculty's opinion on engagement. These men gradually found other people who were concerned with some of the doctrinal errors they saw creeping into the Missouri Synod. It was this St. Louis Study Club that brought the OLC into being.

The formal organization of the OLC took place on September 26, 1951, in Okabena, Minnesota. The St. Louis Study Club met there at the invitation of St. John's Congregation, a former Missouri Synod

¹Proceedings of the Forty-First Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950) p. 585.

²Ibid., pp. 578, 589.

congregation that had recently become independent. Although the men had not come there for the purpose of establishing a new synod, it was concluded that this was the only God-pleasing action in view of the heterodox confession of the Missouri Synod. At this formulating convention a "Confession of Faith" was drawn up and adopted along with the "Articles of Agreement."³

In the preamble to the "Articles of Agreement" fellowship with Missouri was formally broken.

Hence, we, under the compulsion of the Word of God, find it necessary to declare, that The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod has left its former orthodox position as a corporate body, destroying the former unity of doctrine and practice and separating itself from our fellowship. However, since we see no hope of cleansing the corporate body of the Missouri Synod from its leaven of false doctrine or ridding it of the presence of false teachers, and since Scripture commands us to "mark and avoid" (Rom. 16, 17), we hereby withdraw from said Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod.⁴

This termination of fellowship was not to signal a complete withdrawal from the Synodical Conference. They were not cutting themselves off from all former fellowship ties. This was made clear by the first essay read at the Okabena convention.

If any go about . . . to disturb the confessional fellowship . . . in the Synodical Conference we cannot go along with this disruptive move, but must by God's grace guard and cherish our confessional fellowship with those with whom the Holy Spirit has given and preserved to us doctrinal unity. We . . . must now and in future declare . . . our unalterable determination to maintain our fellowship with that part, and that part only, of the Synodical Conference which takes this position (i.e., of the Norwegian and Wisconsin Synods, which had rejected the Common Confession). This we must do now, and this we must do permanently. Thus shall

³Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference, 1952, p. 66, and Orthodox Lutheran, February, 1952, p. 43.

⁴"Articles of Agreement," The Orthodox Lutheran, November, 1951, p. 2.

we endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.⁵

This desire for continued fellowship with the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods was made official at the Okabena convention by this resolution:

That we considered this assent [i.e., a similar rejection of the "Common Confession"] to be expressive of the continued unity of doctrine and practice between our Orthodox Lutheran Conference and the afore-mentioned Norwegian and Wisconsin Synods in the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America.⁶

Thus, from its very founding the OLC declared itself in fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod.

Frequent articles in the Orthodox Lutheran also gave testimony to the affinity the OLC felt toward Wisconsin. In the first issue of the Orthodox Lutheran this statement is even made:

Formal union between the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods and the Orthodox Lutheran Conference is something that must develop in the months to come. Formal action can be taken only by convention of the three bodies concerned.⁷

However, a formal declaration of fellowship between the Wisconsin Synod and the OLC never came to be. President Brenner of Wisconsin pointed out the problem in a letter to Pastor Albert Schupmann, Secretary of the OLC. The letter is dated December 6, 1951.

You cannot but be aware of the fact that your conference has already taken action, while we are still maintaining fellowship with the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod by way of brotherly admonition, and that this greatly complicates the question of declaring fellowship, or the continuation of fellowship, with your body.⁸

⁵Quoted by Albert Schupmann, "Keeping the Balance Between Rom. 16:17 and Eph. 4:3," OL, June, 1956, p. 83.

⁶Quoted in OL, December, 1953, p. 237.

⁷"Our Relations with the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods," OL, November, 1951, p. 11.

⁸Quoted in OL, December, 1953, p. 237.

It was this problem of a triangular fellowship that Professor Reim also mentioned in his article in the Quartalschrift of January, 1952. He wrote:

It has become clear that this new group desires to remain in fellowship with those sister synods in the Synodical Conference that share their stand on the Common Confession. That this creates a rather strange situation will be clear to everyone. For the obligations under which the several synods of the Synodical Conference stand to each other precludes an expression of fellowship by one body in which the others cannot concur. Of this the members of the new group are entirely aware.

Certainly Professor Reim saw the men of the OLC as brothers in the faith. However, there could be no formal recognition of this while Wisconsin was still in fellowship with Missouri, even though this was protesting fellowship.

In this early period there was no disagreement between the OLC and the Wisconsin Synod on the question of Church and Ministry. Although no formal conferences were held between the OLC and Wisconsin, an informal meeting was held on April 18, 1952. In his report to the 1952 convention of the OLC President McLaughlin related that the Board of Directors "conferred with the entire Thiensville Faculty on the doctrine of the Church and Ministry, resulting in a mutual acknowledgment of doctrinal unity."¹⁰

In a letter to President Brenner, Pres. McLaughlin expressed himself more fully concerning this meeting:

In this very frank and fraternal, though informal, meeting, however, our discussion of the Church-Ministry difficulty, open and unreserved as it was, did not bring to light any departure from the full truth of God's Word on either side. It did show our agreement in repudiating the theoretically congregational but actually hierarchical polity now being practiced by the Missouri Synod, and in rejecting any idea of

⁹Professor E. Reim, Quartalschrift, Vol. 49, No. 1 (January, 1952), p. 59.

¹⁰Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention of the OLC, 1952, p. 60.

a Synod as a "super-church," a rejection very emphatically and repeatedly voiced by members of the learned Faculty, and very heartily appreciated by the members of our Board. While the informal nature of the meeting precluded the passing of resolutions or the recording of minutes, all who were present seemed convinced that it was fruitful, under the blessing of Him whose we are and whom we serve, in the brotherly expression of godly unity in the one true Faith.¹¹

Thus Pres. McLaughlin was convinced that doctrinal unity did exist between the OLC and Wisconsin in all matters. From its very first meeting in Okabena, Minnesota, the OLC had expressed its certainty of doctrinal unity with and desire for fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod. It was simply the matter that fellowship could not formally be established by the Wisconsin Synod while it remained in fellowship with Missouri.

While doctrinal agreement was declared by President McLaughlin in 1952, many of the statements on church and ministry the OLC later produced seems to deny this fact. That is the the study of the next portion of this paper.

II. The Church and Ministry Question

The letter by Pres. McLaughlin quoted in the previous section draws attention to the part of the church and ministry debate that caused the greatest concern for the OLC members. They saw the Missouri Synod acting as though the synod were a "super-church" with authority greater than the congregation. It is true, there were cases of synodical "tyranny" that OLC pastors and congregations endured. Thus it is quite natural that their concern about the power of the synod came forth again and again in their writings on church and ministry.

The early issues of the Orthodox Lutheran are full of congregational

¹¹Quoted in OL, December, 1953, p. 238.

histories. They all speak of the same problem--Missouri Synod officials ousting the called pastor and splitting the congregation without any Scriptural grounds or authority. In fact, the Orthodox Lutheran goes so far as to say that the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod was a dictatorship.¹² In April, 1952, the following is one of five accusations the OLC brought against Missouri.

2. We accuse the Missouri Synod, and in particular its governing officials, of hierarchical tyranny, in assuming a supposed right to interfere in congregational affairs. A Christian congregation is the highest court in the Church, and the parish pastorate is the highest office in the Church. A pastor's position is not established by his membership in any particular church body, but by the call of the congregation. To make the signing of any synodical constitution an absolute requirement for holding the pastoral office smacks of popery of the most objectionable kind.¹³

In the January, 1952 issue of the Orthodox Lutheran nine separate cases of this "synoditi^Sg" (as the OLC called it) are detailed. Most are similar to the fourth example which we quote in full:

We now proceed to one of the cases in a western state, where a pastor likewise, for reasons of conscience, in connection with the changed confessional basis of the Missouri Synod, had refused to sign the constitution. The procedure of the officials [of the Missouri Synod] followed the pattern established elsewhere; the members of the congregation were stirred up against their pastor, not on the basis of reasons given in the constitution for the rightful dismissal of a pastor (false doctrine, offense in life, unfaithfulness in the discharge of pastoral duties), but solely on the grounds of setting aside synodical regulations (?). Fortunately, in this instance also, the pastor was able to salvage a very fine remnant of the congregation.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, this was the kind of incident which nearly every pastor and congregation of the OLC endured. The Missouri Synod

¹²"A Synodical Polity Dictatorship," OL, December, 1951, p. 23.

¹³Dr. P.E. Kretzmann, "Our Accusations Against Missouri Synod," OL April, 1952, p. 76.

¹⁴H.A. Strumpler and Dr. P.E. Kretzmann, "Church Dictatorship in the Missouri Synod," OL, January, 1952, p. 34.

could not stand by and simply watch its congregations slip away. But the OLC pastors saw this official intervention as meddling in other men's matters. They felt the pastor, who is faithful to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, was the one called to shepherd that flock, not the synodical officials. To them, it was an attack on the pastoral office.

Against this background of rough handling by the Missouri Synod officials, one can better understand some of the statements made in articles on the church and ministry question.

The official resolution on the doctrine of the church adopted at the special OLC convention in January, 1952, states:

While the Greek word for church or assembly (ekklesia), according to its etymology may be applied to any group of Christians, and such a group has the rights of the universal priesthood, the specific usage of the word in the New Testament clearly indicates that Holy Writ applies the designation to a group of Christians in a limited locality, with a permanent organization, and with specific functions associated with the local congregation. . . . A synod is a federation of congregations (and individuals), a service organization, not a super-church.¹⁵

Note the emphasis of this statement on the local congregation. Again the idea of the synod as a "super-church" was specifically rejected.

The sovereignty of the local congregation is again professed in an article by Dr. Kretzmann:

According to Scripture the individual congregation is the unit of the so-called visible Church. . . . To the local congregation, as an autonomous, sovereign, independent body, were assigned the public administration of the means of grace, cases of church discipline, and all the functions related to them.¹⁶

The constitution of the OLC even goes so far as to say, "The

¹⁵"Group Adopts Two Resolutions," OL, March, 1952, p. 52.

¹⁶Dr. P.E. Kretzmann, "Autonomy---Fellowship," OL, May, 1953, p. 99.

congregation is the highest court in the Church."¹⁷

Finally by 1957, this clear distinction between the local congregation and synod was made by Pastor W. H. McLaughlin:

The local church is a divine institution. That the formation of local congregations is a divine ordinance is established by direct and indirect Scripture proof. . . . The uniting of local congregations into synods, conferences, etc., is only an ecclesiastical ordinance, that is, to say, it is left to Christian liberty, since there is no command of God to this effect in Scripture.¹⁸

The related doctrine of the ministry also presented problems toward doctrinal unity with Wisconsin. Here too the OLC all along seemed to hold the position commonly characterized as the "Missouri" position on the ministry. In the resolution adopted by the OLC's special convention in January, 1952, this statement is found.

This office [of the parish pastor] as the best teachers of the Lutheran Church have correctly stated, is the highest office in the Church, and all other congregational and ecclesiastical positions and offices are auxiliary to this office, as clearly indicated in the New Testament.¹⁹

This view continued to be held as is seen in the "Confessional Platform" adopted at the OLC convention of 1954:

While the parish ministry is not a hierarchical station (rank, or class), but is properly an office of service, it is the highest office in the Church, from which all other congregational and ecclesiastical offices are derived, as auxiliary offices, and are therefore rightly placed in the category of the divine call. . . . We reject and condemn the teaching of those . . . who place the power of synodical officials above those of the parish minister.²⁰

In the January, 1958, issue of the Orthodox Lutheran this same

¹⁷"Constitution of the OLC," OL, September, 1952, p. 155.

¹⁸W.H. McLaughlin, "The Church," OL, December, 1957, p. 198.

¹⁹"Group Adopts Two Resolutions," OL, March, 1952, p. 52.

²⁰Our Confessional Platform--Unanimously Adopted in the O.L.C. Convention of 1954 (Minneapolis: The Parish Press, n.d.), pp. 14, 15.

confession is made by Professor W.H. McLaughlin of the Orthodox Lutheran Seminary:

The public ministry is the highest office in the Christian Church. . . . The office of the public ministry is the only divinely instituted public office in the Christian Church.²¹

These statements on both the doctrine of the church and of the ministry contain elements which the Wisconsin could not subscribe to. Yet, if we see these statements in the context of the history of these congregations and pastors of the OLC, we can at least understand them better. They were looking for protection from synodical domination. They saw synodical officials as busybodies in the affairs of their congregations. Their exegesis of the Scripture passages involved showed them that the congregation has all the rights of the church. Their problem developed when they then made the conclusion that, if the local congregation had the full rights of the church, then the synod could claim none for itself. They saw the synod and local congregation as rivals. This conclusion is made very plain in an article in the Orthodox Lutheran Theologian, the publication of the Orthodox Lutheran Seminary:

We will see again and again that the local parish large, small, rich or poor in earthly goods, is endowed with ALL spiritual powers and is therefore never dependent upon the authority or membership of any church body. Now, if God has given the congregation of believers ALL the treasure of heaven, what did he give someone else?²²

Their doctrine of the ministry that the pastoral office was the highest office of the church fit together well with their doctrine of

²¹W.H. McLaughlin, "We all Believe in One True God: The Ministry," OL, January, 1958, p. 7.

²²"On the Church," Orthodox Lutheran Theologian, May-August, 1960, p. 43.

the church. If the local congregation is the only divine institution of the church, then the man a local congregation calls holds the highest office. This highest office of the church then could not legally be taken away by the order of a synod official who held only an auxiliary office to the pastoral ministry.

That this OLC view was in conflict with what was being taught at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Thiensville was plainly expressed in the Orthodox Lutheran in April, 1959. That issue contained an invitation from the OLC Fellowship Committee to several congregations which had split off from the Wisconsin Synod. One of the points the invitation asks the congregation to discuss was the following:

We feel confident that you are likewise maintaining true Biblical orthodoxy (unless you have adopted the Wauwatosa-Joh. Meyer position on the Church-Ministry question--a question which we would be very happy to discuss with you).²³

This statement shows they felt there was no agreement between Professor Meyer's treatment of the doctrine of church and ministry and their own. In fact, this statement implies that Prof. Meyer's position was a heterodox one.

The reason that this difference of views on church and ministry did not necessarily cause a division between the OLC and Wisconsin is that the position of the Wisconsin Synod on church and ministry was not unanimously held even in Wisconsin. There were some Wisconsin Synod pastors who held views similar to the men of the OLC. The problem did not really come to a head until the Missouri Synod began to use their false^s notion of church and ministry (which the OLC held) to defend some of their unionistic practices such as the military chaplaincy.

Certainly there was agreement between Wisconsin and the OLC on

^r 23 "A Fellowship Approach," OL, April, 1959, p. 59.

the Thiensville Theses. There was also agreement that the synod was not some "super-church" as the actions of Missouri seemed to teach. Beyond that, the difference could often be construed as a lack of clarity and understanding on the part of the opposite group.

When the OLC finally sought to join Wisconsin, ~~then~~ this point was discussed. But by that time the men who had held most tenaciously to the church-ministry position enunciated in the Orthodox Lutheran had already left the OLC.²⁴ The men that were left were given an opportunity to read the Committee on Church Union's theses on church and ministry. In these theses appear two antitheses which would seem to make agreement impossible for the OLC pastors. The antithesis on the doctrine of the church reads:

We hold it to be untenable to say that the local congregation is specifically instituted by God in contrast to other groupings of believers in Jesus' name; that the public ministry of the keys has been given exclusively to the local congregations.²⁵

The antithesis on the doctrine of the ministry:

We hold it to be untenable to say that the pastorate of the local congregation (Pfarramt) as a specific form of the public ministry is specifically instituted by the Lord in contrast to other forms of the public ministry. 26

Yet, the OLC men did agree. In the minutes of the meeting of the Committee on Doctrinal Matters of WELS together with the OLC, it is reported that Pastor Otto Schupmann, OLC President, said;

²⁴Dr. P.E. Kretzmann and Pastor W.H. McLaughlin both left the OLC in 1959. Former OLC Pastors W.H. McLaughlin, L.N. Wilenius, and E. Erickson all kept their strong "Missouri" view of church and ministry as evidenced by their later membership in the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation.

²⁵Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1970, p. 9.

²⁶Ibid., p. 11.

"Concerning Church & Ministry our thinking is that we could all subscribe to the Thiensville Theses - when Wis speaks of 'in Jesus' name,' we understand that to mean 'according to His Word,' without violating the law of love - we studied the Wis. pamphlets put out some years back and found nothing unScriptural in them - we might express ourselves differently, but the principles the same." 27

It also mentions in the minutes "that OLC men may not have full grasp of Wis terminology concerning Church & Ministry but find nothing false in what they've read."²⁸

It would seem that this confusion of terms referred to in the minutes of that meeting helped explain how the pastors of the OLC could accept the Wisconsin statement on church and ministry. While in the OLC, these men had directed their attention to showing that synod did not have authority over the local congregation. The Wisconsin position rather emphasized that both bodies are equally "church," but that because of Christian love and for the sake of order, the synod would not interfere with the work of the local congregation, but would rather concentrate on doing that portion of church work the congregation could not do as efficiently.

In summary, there was a definite difference between the OLC and Wisconsin in the 1950's on the church and ministry question. However, this problem in itself was not the decisive factor in keeping the OLC and Wisconsin apart. As that final meeting of the OLC and WELS Commission on Doctrinal Matters showed, once the problem of a three-way fellowship was solved by Wisconsin's termination of fellowship with Missouri, there was agreement found on the question of church and ministry.

²⁷ Minutes, Commission on Doctrinal Matters, NPH, Milwaukee, Feb. 28, 1962, 2:00 P.M..

²⁸ Ibid...

III. In a State of Confession

Before our discussion of the church and ministry question we had seen that the OLC considered itself in fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod from the very beginning. This view began to change somewhat as the years progressed and Wisconsin remained in a state of confession over against Missouri. The OLC grew quite doubtful that Wisconsin would ever terminate fellowship. We shall not^w trace the relationship of the OLC and the Wisconsin Synod through the years of frustration in the 1950's including the "heterodox" problem of 1956.

The time of an open-arms invitation to fellowship did not last very long. This invitation was formulated at the organizing convention on September 26, 1951. President Brenner acknowledge receipt of this invitation, but no official action could be taken. Even so, the OLC and Wisconsin held each^c other in very high regard during this early period.

The OLC's discontent with Wisconsin began to show already in 1952. After the 1952 Synodical Convention the Church Union Committee of the Wisconsin Synod went on record as being in a state of confession (in statu confessionis). Certainly this brought joy to the members of the OLC who had severed relations with Missouri^f for some of the same reasons. The problem came in the definition of "a state of confession."

The definition that the OLC worked with is given in the August-September issue of the Orthodox Lutheran in 1955:

A state of confession: A suspension of religious fellowship from the church body^s, which one belongs as a final strenuous protest against error in doctrine or practice. Such action is based on II Thes. 3:14,15. 29

²⁹OL, August-September, 1955, p. 23.

Dr. Kretzmann had said the same already in November, 1953. "If this [being in a state of confession] is not mere shadow boxing, this includes the discontinuance of not only altar and pulpit fellowship, but also of prayer fellowship."³⁰

The definition of the Wisconsin Synod Church Union Committee was different. This can be seen in the statement preceeding the Committee's declaration of being in a state of confession:

We, therefore, declare, in order to guard our own faith and to remain true to our God, that, though we do not at this time disavow our fellowship with the Missouri Synod in the Synodical Conference, yet, 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. Thus while we await a decision by 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. (emphasis added) 31

From this statement it is plain the Committee did not consider being in a state of confession synonymous with breaking all fellowship relations. They considered it a protest against false doctrine while continuing to maintain fellowship in the hopes that Missouri would see its error. Professor Reim's article in the Northwestern Lutheran makes it clear that Missouri did hear their confession. By the declaration the committee members wanted all to know that they had not changed their convictions. As Professor Reim stated; "Lest our continued membership in the Synodical Conference be construed as a surrender of our convictions,

³⁰ P.E. Kretzmann, "What does being 'In Statu Confessionis' Mean?" OL, November, 1953, p. 218.

³¹ "A Report by the Wisconsin Synod Committee on Church Union," Northwestern Lutheran, September 7, 1952, pp. 281, 282.

it is necessary that no one be left in doubt."³²

Professor Blume wrote an article for the Northwestern Lutheran about two months later on this term "state of confession." He made the point that the Church Union Committee had been speaking for itself. The Synod would have to take action at the next convention, but until then "any member of our synod should feel free to take his own stand on the matter."³³

It is this report that first received the attack of the Orthodox Lutheran. President McLaughlin asked, "Is this the voice of Wisconsin?" He felt that "since the declaration of its Committee on Church Union [is] based on clear Scripture, and must therefore bind the conscience of all members of an orthodox Synod, . . . the way certainly does not lie open for each member of the synod to make up his own mind on the matter." President McLaughlin came to the conclusion that "only an official disclaimer of this article can restore the orthodox position of the Wisconsin Synod which we have been so happy to acclaim."³⁴

Just a little over a year after the invitation of fellowship first was made, the orthodoxy of the Wisconsin Synod was being questioned by the OLC.

No doubt the OLC still held Wisconsin as a whole in high regard. Their high hopes were soon brought down by the 1953 convention of the Wisconsin Synod. Instead of breaking fellowship as the OLC expected,

³²Professor E. Reim, "As We See It: A State of Confession," Northwestern Lutheran, September 7, 1952, p. 282.

³³Professor F. Blume, "A State of Confession," NWL, November 2, 1952, p. 345.

³⁴President W.H. McLaughlin, "Is This the Voice of Wisconsin?" OL, December, 1952, pp. 25,26.

Wisconsin reaffirmed its state of confession over against Missouri.

Before Wisconsin's recessed convention of August 8 and 9, 1953, President McLaughlin already made this judgment:

Yes, there is something wrong with Wisconsin. It is lack of unanimity in confessional action, hesitancy in reducing correct doctrine to practice, failure to respond as a corporate body to an official overture for fellowship in the truth extended by a body to whose doctrinal position Wisconsin has not taken exception, while hesitating to sever fellowship with a body which has itself "broken the link" which bound the Synodical Conference together. 35

Because the Wisconsin Synod did not break fellowship with the Missouri Synod, Trinity Lutheran Church of Chesterfield, Missouri, asked that a referendum be circulated through all the OLC congregations. The referendum resolved "to immediately withdraw the hand of fellowship or overture of fellowship until such time as the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States can adhere to the clear precept of Scripture."³⁶ This referendum was unanimously passed by all the OLC congregations and was officially published in December, 1953. Thus the original open invitation for fellowship was withdrawn only two years after it was first given.

In that same issue Pastor P.R. Bloedel concluded that "the Wisconsin Synod has become a unionistic fellowship, a partaker in the sins of Missouri, a heterodox church body."³⁷ At the time the editor of the Orthodox Lutheran thought "a heterodox church body" was meant to modify Missouri. Only later did it become clear that Pastor Bloedel charged

³⁵W.H. McLaughlin, "Which Way, Wisconsin?" OL, October, 1953, p. 200.

³⁶"Announcement," OL, December, 1953, p. 231.

³⁷P.R. Bloedel, "Where Does the Wisconsin Synod Stand Since Its Special Convention at Milwaukee?" OL, December, 1953, p. 247.

the Wisconsin Synod of being a heterodox church body.³⁸

Relations between Wisconsin and the OLC became even more strained with the acceptance of Pastor E.C. Hallstein into the OLC. Pastor Hallstein had withdrawn from the Wisconsin Synod because "Wisconsin had become a unionistic church body in the resolution it adopted at its Milwaukee convention."³⁹ He had urged his Wisconsin Synod congregation to withdraw from the synod and become independent. The majority of the congregation voted to stay in the Wisconsin Synod, but Pastor Hallstein and the minority of the congregation joined the OLC. This congregational split left wounds which further separated the OLC from Wisconsin.

In July, 1954, an official statement by President McLaughlin was published charging the Wisconsin Synod with unionism and the kind of synodical tyranny that Missouri had used on other OLC congregations.

Our position is that the Wisconsin Synod as a corporate body has become heterodox through its unionistic association with the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod and through its tyrannical action in the case of Pastor Hallstein. For these two reasons we withhold the hand of fellowship formerly extended to the Wisconsin Synod. We hold that the Wisconsin Synod as a corporate body is not in a true state of confession because of its continued fellowship with the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod. 40

It would seem clear that the OLC considered Wisconsin a heterodox church body. This became even more evident in a note written by Pastor P.R. Bloedel in the June, 1955 issue of the Orthodox Lutheran. In a reprinted article mention was made of "our brethern who profess the same faith with us but who have so far failed to join us in confessional

³⁸W.H. McLaughlin, "A Clarification: Wisconsin Synod 'Heterodox'?" OL, February, 1956, p. 20.

³⁹E.C. Hallstein, "Wisconsin Follows Missouri's Footsteps," OL, February, 1954, p. 24.

⁴⁰W.H. McLaughlin, "Our Position over Against the Wisconsin Synod," OL, July-August, 1954, p. 126.

action." Rev. Bloedel's note is that "as far as we know, there are no longer such brethren as there were when this article was written in 1952."⁴¹ This blanket statement passed judgment not only upon the men who remained in the Missouri Synod, but also upon the Wisconsin Synod. Clearly, Pastor Bloedel no longer felt the Wisconsin Synod professed the same faith as the OLC.

At this low point in OLC-Wisconsin relations, a division occurred in the OLC. Pastor Arthur Schupmann, former secretary of the OLC, explained that there were personality differences that really lay at the heart of this division. Dr. P.E. Kretzmann made a remark in his theology class at the Orthodox Lutheran Seminary that really started the problem that led to the break. He said that under the circumstances he could preach for a pastor who was a member of the Wisconsin Synod. That pastor was G.W. Fischer of Immanuel Lutheran of Mankato who had been vocal in his desire for Wisconsin to break fellowship with Missouri. It was a hypothetical case; Dr. Kretzmann was never asked to preach there and never did.

However, E.C. Hallstein, the pastor who had just two years earlier left the Wisconsin Synod, accused Dr. Kretzmann of heresy. He charged that Dr. Kretzmann had made a unionistic statement. This charge and a counter-charge by Dr. Kretzmann caused an almost even split in the conference. This split was formalized on January 18, 1956 when the group who formed the Concordia Lutheran Conference adopted the position

⁴¹ Editor's note by P.R. Bloedel on "A Renewed Invitation" by W.H. McLaughlin, OL, June, 1955, p. 87.

⁴² "Resolution Concerning the Minneapolis Faction," Concordia Lutheran, September, 1957, p. 133.

paper "Our Declaration."⁴³

From this split two differing views on the Wisconsin Synod emerged. The Concordia Lutheran Conference continued to consider Wisconsin as a heterodox Lutheran body. "Our Declaration" established their fellowship position:

We recognize those only as true brethren in the faith who openly and publicly acknowledge our Scriptural position in doctrine and practice, I Cor. 1:10. This we designate by the human term: confessional fellowship. It is the Scriptural duty of such heartily to support our work and endeavors and thus to practice church fellowship with us, otherwise they are separatistic, 2 Tim. 1:8; 3 Jchn 9. 44

The difference between the two factions was their use of the term "confessional fellowship." This term is distinguished from "church fellowship" by both the OLC and the Concordia Lutheran Conference. Because this distinction is not one we normally make, we will let Pastor McLaughlin explain the difference.

Confessional fellowship is the actual discoverable fact that two or more individuals, congregations, or church bodies are teaching the same doctrine in conformity with the same confession. . . .

Church fellowship is joint worship and work in the religious sphere, or the practice of altar fellowship, pulpit fellowship, and prayer fellowship. . . .

Confessional fellowship is a necessary prerequisite for church fellowship, as the Scripture passages just quoted demonstrate. That the discovery of confessional fellowship does not automatically establish church fellowship is due only to the requirements of good order and due consideration for our brethren in the faith. 45

The point where the OLC and the Concordia Lutheran Conference differed

⁴³ Although both groups clung to the name Orthodox Lutheran Conference during 1956, the group on the side of Pastor Hallstein adopted the name Concordia Lutheran Conference on January 1, 1957. To avoid confusion the group that eventually took the name Concordia Lutheran Conference will henceforth be indicated by that name.

⁴⁴ "Our Declaration," OL, P.R. Bloedel, editor, February, 1956, p. 20.

⁴⁵ W.H. McLaughlin, "The Necessary Distinction Between Confessional Fellowship and Church Fellowship," OL, O.G. Schupmann, editor, March, 1956, pp. 36, 37.

is their categorizing of the Wisconsin Synod. The Concordia Lutheran Conference held that they did not have the same confessional position as Wisconsin. P.R. Bloedel gave the Concordia Lutheran Conference view:

The true Orthodox Lutheran Conference position [that is, the position of the group that became the Concordia Lutheran Conference], based on God's Word alone, is simply this, that because of their departure from the plain Word of God and their persistence in the same, we are not in confessional fellowship and consequently not in church fellowship with the Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Synod, the Norwegian Synod or the Minneapolis faction [of the OLC]. 46

The Minneapolis faction of the OLC, as the Concordia Lutheran Conference called their opponents, held that they remained in confessional fellowship with Wisconsin, but not church fellowship. This group of the OLC sought a better balance between the "avoiding" of Romans 16:17 and the endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). They sought to remain in the confessional fellowship that they saw existed between the OLC and Wisconsin. They urged the Concordia Lutheran Conference to look back and see that this was the original purpose of the OLC.

Let us be reminded here also of another fact connected with our decision to "avoid" Missouri. At the time that we separated ourselves from and applied Rom. 16:17 to, that unionistic, heterodox body, we did not lose our balance. . . . We bore in mind that there were still orthodox individuals, congregations, and synods that were in fellowship with us and had escaped being partakers of the sins of Missouri by protesting against Missouri's aberrations. We did not, and could not, apply Rom. 16:17 to them simply because they did not join us in "avoiding" Missouri in 1951--unless we wished to act as lords over other men's consciences. 47

⁴⁶ P.R. Bloedel, "The Peculiar Position of The Minneapolis Faction," OL, P.R. Bloedel, editor, November, 1956, p. 173.

⁴⁷ Albert M. Schupmann, "Keeping the Balance Between Rom. 16:17 and Eph. 4:3," OL, O.G. Schupmann, editor, p. 83.

Consequently, the OLC disavowed the charge of heterodoxy against the Wisconsin Synod. Professor McLaughlin made this clear in the February, 1956 issue of the Orthodox Lutheran. There he concluded:

The considered ^Sposition of the undersigned is that the Wisconsin Synod cannot at the present time be stigmatized as a heterodox body, and that such a charge is incapable of proof; but that it has cast suspicion upon its orthodoxy by its dangerous procrastinations in severing its bonds with the heterodox Missouri Synod, and that we can have no fellowship with it until it has fully established a clear orthodox position against Missouri's heterodoxy. 48

Thus the OLC, in contrast with the Concordia Lutheran Conference, stood by Wisconsin in the early part of 1956. However the recessed convention of the Wisconsin Synod later in the year soured the OLC. In a comment on the minority report to terminate fellowship (which the convention did not pass) Editor Otto G. Schupmann made this judgment:

If the Wisconsin Synod had adopted this Minority Report we could have some hope for that church body. . . . So long as church bodies, congregations, pastors, teachers, professors, church officials, or the lay men and women in any land or church body adhere to false doctrine and/or forbidden fellowship they abide under the wrath of God! Hence we pray that God would have mercy upon such and open their ears to hear the Truth! 49

IV. The Reunion of Fellowship

This judgment that Wisconsin ⁹⁵was gradually slipping away from its orthodoxy continued until the 1961 convention of the Wisconsin Synod. At that convention Wisconsin did terminate fellowship with the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod. This was a fulfillment of the fervent hopes of

⁴⁸W.H. McLaughlin, "A Clarification: Wisconsin Synod 'Heterodox'?" OL, O.G. Schupmann, editor, February, 1956, p. 21.

⁴⁹O.G. Schupmann, "Comment on the Minority Report," OL, O.G. Schupmann, editor, November, 1956, pp. 178, 179.

the OLC.

Some of us have at times almost given up hope that they would ever realize that continued patience was useless. . . . Now that the decision has been made, we rejoice that our hopes--weak as they had become--have been fulfilled. 50

In the November-December, 1961 issue of the Orthodox Lutheran, the Church Fellowship Committee of the OLC declared their willingness to restore^a fellowship with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod.⁵¹ This paved the way for the final meeting of the OLC on February 28, 1962.

On that day the remaining clergy of the OLC (Pastor Arthur W. Schupmann, President Otto G. Schupmann, Professor Albert M. Schupmann, and Pastor H.W. Bittorf) and the lay representatives met with the WELS Commission on Doctrinal Matters at Northwestern Publishing House. Prior to this meeting the OLC representatives had received copies of the Commission's statements on church and ministry. Professor Carl Lawrenz, Commission Chairman, suggested the meeting begin with the OLC men expressing themselves on the church and ministry statement. The minutes of the meeting record these remarks by Pastor O.G. Schupmann:

Wis. Synod people have always been brethren to us, though the observance of fellowship was necessarily suspended in recent years - we still stand on verbal inspiration & accept the Confessions quia not quatenus . . . Concerning Church & Ministry our thinking is that we could all subscribe to the Thiensville Theses.- when Wis speaks of 'in Jesus' name,' we understand that to mean 'according to His Word,' without violating the law of love - we studied the Wis. pamphlets put out some years back and found nothing unScriptural in them - we might express ourselves differently, but the principles the same - we would like very much to resume our fellowship with Wis - we would like to dissolve the OLC

⁵⁰"Our Hopes for Wisconsin and the Norwegians," OL, November-December, 1961, p. 166.

⁵¹O. G. Schupmann and A.M. Schupmann, "New Pattern: A Design is Evident," OL, November-December, 1961, pp. 166,167.

and then apply individually for membership in Wis. Synod.⁵²

Thus true to their confession at the very founding of the OLC, these men sought not to be separatistic but to enjoy and express the common confession of faith which the OLC and WELS held. Wisconsin had terminated fellowship with Missouri nearly ten years after the OLC, but once this step was taken, there was no confessional reason to keep the two bodies apart.

The dissolution of the OLC and a declaration^{OF} unity of confession was made official by the following notice that appeared in the Northwestern Lutheran:

The Commission on Doctrinal Matters met on February 28, 1962, with the following pastors, who at present constitute the entire pastoral membership of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference fellowship: Albert M. Schupmann, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Otto G. Schupmann, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Arthur W. Schupmann, Ballwin, Missouri; Harold W. Bittorf, Halstead, Kansas. . . . To the extent that the doctrines of Church Fellowship and of Church and Ministry were discussed, the Commission wishes to state that it found itself in doctrinal agreement with these men. These pastors stated ^{that} with expected agreement also on the part of their congregations it is their intention to dissolve the Orthodox Lutheran Conference and to apply individually as pastors and congregations for membership in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Action on the individual applications will, of course, lie in the jurisdiction of the respective Districts of our Synod.⁵³

It is a sad ending, but also a happy one for the tiny OLC. As the first body to declare the Missouri Synod heterodox and to terminate fellowship, the OLC took a courageous step. Certainly it was their hope that their little group would be expanded by other Missouri pastors and congregations. Sadly, this hope was largely unfulfilled.

⁵²Minutes, Commission on Doctrinal Matters, NPH, Milwaukee, February 28, 1962, 2:00 P.M..

⁵³"Announcement," Northwestern Lutheran, Vol. 49, Number 9 (May 6, 1962), p. 142. All of these pastors and congregations were accepted. Professor Albert M. Schupmann left the ministry when he joined the Wisconsin Synod.

However it was a happy ending in that the common confession they had always maintained with Wisconsin could once again be expressed in church fellowship--once again working together to extend Christ's Church.

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