

The Dissolution of the Synodical Conference

Treasured Fellowship

The Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America was a singular blessing for the Wisconsin Synod and the cause of confessional Lutheranism in America. Wisconsin benefited greatly from the mutual encouragement, joint publishing efforts like *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941), involvement in mission efforts like the so called Negro Missions in the South and the Nigerian Mission, and the sharing of pulpits, classrooms, and altars under the banner of confessional Lutheranism. The breakup of the Synodical Conference was difficult and traumatic. It separated friends and divided families. In 1932 no one would ever have anticipated what was about to happen to the Synodical Conference.

1932-1938

In 1931 a committee of the Missouri Synod produced the "Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod." Dr. Franz Pieper was its main author. He was taken to heaven that same year. Of the 719 listed, 424 congregations were members of the synod, 192 were independent Lutheran congregations served by the synod's pastors, and 103 were preaching places. Missouri Synod in convention adopted the "Brief Statement" in 1932. The document was recognized as a sound statement of the Lutheran faith by the other members of the Synodical Conference and, in fact, provided a doctrinal rallying point for those who wished to hold to Lutheran orthodoxy. But by the end of the decade the Missouri Synod was on a course at variance with the synod's historic confession and practice and that of the Wisconsin Synod.

Military Chaplaincy

In June 1934 the Atlantic District of the Missouri Synod drafted a memorial to the Synod to set up an Army and Navy Commission to recommend men to the United States government for service as military chaplains. The very next year the U.S. government made an official request to the Missouri Synod for chaplains. The 1935 convention of the Missouri Synod passed a resolution authorizing an Army and Navy Commission to investigate the assurances which had been given that Missouri's principles would be honored by the government. At the time the Missouri Synod met in convention only every three years. By the next convention in 1938 there were several Missouri Synod chaplains serving in the armed forces.

The Wisconsin Synod received the same request from the U.S. government, but took different action. The 1937 Wisconsin Synod Convention recommended appointing a committee to look into the issue and bring a report back to the 1939 convention. The 1939 convention decided not to recommend or commission Wisconsin Synod pastors for the chaplaincy service because the fundamental principle of separation of church and state is violated by such appointments and because it would become a practical impossibility for such chaplains to practice sound doctrine and confessional Lutheranism once they were in the military. The 1941 convention unanimously rejected participation once again, this time adding that appointments to the chaplaincy conflicted with the synod's doctrinal stand on the divinity of the call.

Missouri and the ALC

The United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA)¹¹ extended an invitation to the synods of the Synodical Conference to meet to consider closer relations. Upon receiving the invitation Pres. Brenner appointed a committee to bring a recommendation to the 1935 convention. This ad hoc committee became the Standing Committee on Church Union.¹² The president also requested a member of that committee, Edmund Reim (1892-1969), later president of the seminary, to deliver at the upcoming synod convention an essay he had previously read at a convention of the Northern Wisconsin District. The essay was entitled, "Church Fellowship and Its Implications." Reim added an additional section to the paper for the synod convention, "With Additional Notes on the Possibilities of Lutheran Union." Both the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods declined the invitation of the ULCA. Missouri representatives met twice with ULCA representatives, but talks ended on a disagreement concerning inspiration.

Of greater concern, however, was Missouri's move toward fellowship with the American Lutheran Church (ALC). The ALC had extended an invitation to Missouri to meet for discussions on future fellowship. Neither the Norwegian Synod nor the Wisconsin Synod received this invitation. In 1938 the ALC declared at its Sandusky convention: "We are firmly convinced that it is neither necessary nor possible to agree in all non-fundamental doctrines" (doctrines revealed in Scripture but not absolutely necessary for saving faith). Earlier that year the Missouri convention resolved that its 1932 confessional declaration, the *Brief Statement*, The ULCA was a result of the 1918 merger of the synods of the General Synod, the United Synod-South, and the General Council.

The ALC was a result of the merger of the Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo Synods. There were a number of doctrinal issues that had historically separated these synods from Missouri, including the various doctrines in contention during the Election Controversy and Iowa's historic position on "Open Questions."

1939-1944

Both the Norwegian and the Wisconsin Synods reacted to Missouri's agreement with the ALC with concern. The Norwegian Synod declared that it could not regard the documents as an adequate basis for future church fellowship. The Wisconsin Synod held that the ALC's Sandusky Resolutions as well as the agreement between representatives of the ALC and ULCA at Pittsburgh earlier in 1939 made it evident that there was no real doctrinal agreement. The synod also declared, "Not two statements should be issued as a basis for agreement; a single joint statement, covering the contested doctrines thetically and antithetically...is imperative." Other confessional voices also raised concern. *The Crucible*, edited by Dr. William Oesch (1896-1982) and published in London, exposed the dangerous position into which the 1938 resolutions had placed Missouri.

In 1940 the Synodical Conference asked Missouri not to enter fellowship with the ALC and to consider the advisability of framing one document of agreement. That same year Pastor Paul Burgdorf of the Missouri Synod began publishing *The Confessional Lutheran* in response to the dangerous trends he saw developing in his synod.

Missouri's 1941 convention resolved to continue negotiations with the ALC, but recognized the desirability of having one document establishing doctrinal agreement. Missouri asked its sister synods to send representatives to the joint meetings of the committee to prepare this document. Both the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods declined. Dr. J. Michael Reu (1869-1943) of the ALC in a published article intimated that the ALC might object to the inclusion of the Norwegian Synod (ELS) and the Wisconsin Synod in the discussions because his church body had not invited the other two synods previously for reasons of its own.

Prayer Fellowship and Cooperation in Externals

Relations in the Synodical Conference deteriorated even more in 1944. Missouri's Saginaw convention that year opened the door for congregational participation in Scouting and made a distinction between "joint prayer" and "prayer fellowship." Missouri claimed that "joint prayer" at intersynodical conferences, asking God for his guidance and blessing upon the deliberations and discussions of his Word, did not militate against its previous stand of no prayer fellowship with errorists, so long as such prayer did not imply denial of truth or support of error.

Another issue that had come to the fore by this time involved cooperative efforts between the Missouri Synod and synods outside its fellowship. Missouri called these joint efforts "cooperation in externals." Wisconsin believed that some of the things Missouri termed "externals" were not, and some things that were "externals" were leading Missouri's pastors and people into unionistic practices. Pres. Brenner sent a letter to the Synodical Conference in 1944 protesting that "we have been seriously perturbed by numerous instances of an anticipation of a union not yet existing, or as it has been put, not yet declared." As a result of this letter the Synodical

Conference established a Committee on Intersynodical Relations consisting of the presidents and two appointed men from each synod.

That same year Missouri and the ALC produced the joint document "Doctrinal Affirmation," an attempt to produce the single document that Wisconsin had earlier asked for to demonstrate that the previous doctrinal differences between the Synodical Conference and the ALC were now settled.

1945-1955

The Norwegian Synod became the ELS in 1958. Both the Norwegian and the Wisconsin Synods saw the Doctrinal Affirmation as an improvement over using two documents for the resolution of doctrinal differences, but neither synod saw the document as a satisfactory statement or settlement of the historic differences between the ALC and Missouri. The Norwegian Synod believed that the Doctrinal Affirmation had weakened the Brief Statement. Wisconsin was not satisfied that all previous errors had been excluded. A Missouri Synod committee tried to meet the objections of the two sister synods and proposed some clarifications to the ALC committee. The ALC in convention failed to approve the Doctrinal Affirmation because the delegates believed that it failed to safeguard the ALC's position in certain articles. The Missouri Synod in 1947 consequently reaffirmed the Brief Statement and set aside the other union documents as a basis for fellowship with the ALC.

The Statement of the Forty-four

Meanwhile there was growing evidence of disunity within the Missouri Synod. A group of forty-four pastors and professors, including four district presidents, five members of the St. Louis faculty, and the editor of the *Concordia Theological Monthly* and the *Lutheran Witness*, met to discuss "a strange and pernicious spirit" that had invaded their synod. The result of the meeting was the issuance of "A Statement" which challenged the exegesis of Romans 16:17-18 and the historic fellowship practice of the Synodical Conference. President John W. Behnken (1884-1968) received a copy of "A Statement" in September of 1945, as he was about to leave on a foreign trip. He asked that it not be published until he had the opportunity to meet with the signers. The proponents of the "Statement of the Forty-four," as it came to be known, published it anyway. Behnken appointed a committee of ten to deal with "A Statement." The report of the Committee of Ten called for firm doctrinal discipline because the Statement espoused exegesis and practice that would disrupt the unity that had always characterized the Missouri Synod. Nevertheless Pres. Behnken eventually allowed the document to be withdrawn from consideration rather than retracted as containing error.

Continuing Concern

The Synodical Conference's Committee on Intersynodical Relations in 1946 noted Missouri's distinction between joint prayer and prayer fellowship and acknowledged incidents in Missouri that went beyond this. The Committee, however, also added, "The assurance was given that infractions have been and are being dealt with and will be dealt with further if the desired results are not forthcoming."

In 1948 the Norwegian Synod's overture to the Synodical Conference expressed its joy that Missouri had reaffirmed the Brief Statement, but called attention to the fact that some in Missouri were practicing fellowship with the ALC. The Norwegians expressed frustration that the offenders not only had not been dealt with, but had even been assigned to new offices and greater responsibilities. The Wisconsin Synod expressed similar frustration. In 1949 the Wisconsin Synod convention through its president addressed six questions to the 1950 Missouri convention regarding specific violations and called for a direct answer that would clarify Missouri's position by public disavowal or removal of the offenses that had been given. Missouri's convention directed Behnken to draft a reply to Wisconsin's questions. The response politely rejected Wisconsin's claims that violations had been committed.

The Common Confession

A new joint ALC/Missouri document, the "Common Confession," was presented to both the Missouri and ALC conventions in 1950. Missouri accepted the confession as a statement of the disputed doctrines that was in harmony with the Scriptures. The Norwegian Synod pastoral conference meeting in November concluded that the Common Confession fell far short of its intended purpose. Some in the Norwegian Synod (ELS) were already recommending an *in statu confessionis* declaration (an "in statu confessionis" declaration is a declaration that a group is in a state of protesting fellowship, the final step before declaring a break in fellowship) over against Missouri. The Wisconsin Synod meeting in convention in August 1951 declared that the Common Confession was unacceptable in its statements on justification, conversion, election, the means of grace, Scripture and inspiration.

Some concerned individuals now began to leave the Missouri Synod. In 1951 Prof. Paul Kretzmann, a professor at St. Louis and the author of the four volume *Popular Commentary of the Bible*, and a few others withdrew from Missouri and formed the Orthodox Lutheran Conference.

In 1952 the Norwegian Synod directed an overture to the Synodical Conference that sufficient time be allotted on the agenda for a through discussion of the Common Confession and the continued doctrinal negotiations between the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church. The preamble of the Synodical Conference's floor committee's report concerning the Common Confession stated that the confession in its present form was inadequate as a settlement of differences and that the document had disturbed the unity of the Synodical Conference. The convention struck the preamble. A substitute motion was passed to postpone all further action on the subject until Part II of the Common Confession was available. The voting showed a deeply divided Synodical Conference with the Missouri and Slovak Synods on one side and the Norwegian and Wisconsin Synods on the other. Because of the size of their synod Missouri had the majority of delegates at the convention. That majority reacted vocally in approval or disapproval of those who spoke for or against the Common Confession. The Wisconsin delegation met privately and declared that they were *in statu confessionis* with the Missouri Synod.

In 1953 Pres. John W. O. Brenner announced that he would not stand for re-election. Pastor Oscar J. Naumann (1909-1979) was elected in his place. Under Naumann the Wisconsin Synod continued the patient admonition of Missouri and the careful presentation of the issues to its own members that had begun under Brenner. That same year Missouri and the ALC completed Part II of the Common Confession in an attempt to meet the objections to Part I that had been raised both within the Missouri Synod and outside it. Part II was published too late for consideration at Missouri's convention, so the discussion of it was postponed until 1956. Missouri in those years met in convention every three years. Wisconsin's convention met in August and again in October 1953. The convention adopted the recommendation "that we declare that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod...has brought about the present break in relations that is threatening the existence of the Synodical Conference and the continuance of our affiliation with the sister Synod."

Missouri prepared a pamphlet entitled "A Fraternal Word" in order to explain its position on the issues in controversy. This publication began a pamphlet war between Missouri and Wisconsin. Wisconsin replied to "A Fraternal Word" with "A Fraternal Word Examined." Missouri followed with "Another Fraternal Endeavor." In early 1954 Wisconsin produced eleven tracts covering all of the main issues between the two synods. The tracts were published under the general theme, "Continuing in His Word." Most of them dealt with the Common Confession and Missouri's continuing negotiations with the ALC. President Behnken gave permission for these tracts to be sent also to every pastor in the Missouri Synod. Missouri then published a final pamphlet, "A Fraternal Reply."

The 1954 Synodical Conference convention gave all of its attention to seven essays on the issues in controversy. Three essays concerned the Common Confession. Two essays presented the military chaplaincy and scouting.

Two essays covered various other issues related to fellowship. After hearing the essays a majority in the Synodical Conference passed a resolution requesting that the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod not use the Common Confession as a functioning union document without, however, passing judgment pro or con on the doctrinal content of the Common Confession. The resolution asking Missouri not to use the Common Confession as a functioning document was not an indication of any change in Missouri's position.

Confession was passing from the scene anyway because the ALC was moving toward union with the other members of the American Lutheran Conference. Thirty delegates from the Norwegian and Wisconsin Synods asked that their negative votes be recorded. An additional twenty-three advisory delegates had their protest recorded. An overture presented earlier in the convention asking the Synodical Conference to reject the Common Confession because it did not define or safeguard the scriptural doctrine taught in the Brief Statement was signed by fifty-one Missouri Synod members. Missouri also was a house divided.

1955-Key Norwegian and Wisconsin Synod Conventions

By 1955 the controversy among the members of the Synodical Conference had come to a head. That year the Norwegian Synod suspended fellowship with the Missouri Synod, but remained in the Synodical Conference and in fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod. Wisconsin's floor committee brought to the convention floor a report whose preamble restated the 1953 declaration and pointed out that this was the kind of situation to which Romans 16:17,18 was applicable. The resolution stated, "that whereas the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has created divisions and offenses by its official resolutions, policies, and practices not in accord with Scripture, we, in obedience to the command of our Lord in Romans 16:17,18, terminate our fellowship with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod." The floor committee stated that final action on the resolution was to be taken at a recessed convention in 1956 after Missouri met so that the Missouri might have the opportunity to express itself on Wisconsin's 1953 admonition. The preamble passed unanimously. The resolution with its proposal of a year's delay was strongly debated and passed 94-47 (the negative votes cast because of the delay). Twenty-four voting delegates and nineteen advisory delegates recorded their names in protest of the delay. Prof. Reim issued a written statement declaring that he could continue in fellowship with his synod only under clear and public protest. He resigned as secretary of the Standing Committee on Church Union and placed his resignation as president and professor of the seminary before the synod and seminary board. The convention gave him a unanimous vote of confidence and asked that the seminary board not accept his resignation. Reim remained as president of the seminary.

1956-1961

The Missouri Synod convention in 1956 declared that the Common Confession would no longer function as a union document (although still viewing it as a statement in harmony with Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions) and gratefully acknowledged the concerns and admonitions that had been addressed to the synod. The Norwegian Synod thanked the Missouri Synod for consideration given to the causes of their suspension of fellowship, but stated that more time was needed to see whether the causes for the suspension of fellowship had been removed. Wisconsin's 1956 convention resolved to "hold in abeyance" the 1955 resolution to terminate fellowship, but to continue in rigorously protesting fellowship. The Synodical Conference met in December. The convention resolved that the Union Committees of the member synods were to meet jointly to draw up a list of problems stating clearly the *status controversiae* of each case, to set each synod's view properly expressed in thetical and antithetical form, and to discuss them throughout the various synods and present their evaluations to the 1958 convention. It also suggested a "conclave of theologians" of overseas brethren to assist in the solution of the unresolved doctrinal problems.

The Joint Union Committee began meeting in January and resolved that Scripture would be the final authority, that there must be a willingness to come to grips with all the issues, to condemn all matter contrary to the Word of God; and that a joint statement must aim at nothing less than full agreement [added later]. The problems to be considered were placed into three groups:

1. Atonement, justification, and the dynamic, or motivating power for the Christian life, with practical application to the question of Scouting.
2. Scripture (revelation, principles of interpretation, open questions) and the practical application to the question of fulfillment of biblical prophecy in history, as, for example, in the doctrine of Antichrist.
3. Grace, conversion, election, and church and ministry, with practical application to questions of fellowship, unionism, separatism, church discipline, and the military chaplaincy.

The WELS floor committee recommended to the 1957 Wisconsin Synod convention that fellowship be terminated. The resolution was defeated 61 ayes to 77 noes. The convention resolved to continue vigorously protesting fellowship and urged a continuation of efforts to restore full unity. Prof. Reim resigned from the seminary. Two district presidents terminated fellowship with the synod.

The Norwegian Synod resolved to continue participation in the Joint Union Committee in spite of some protests from within the synod.

The Synodical Conference in convention in 1958 received a statement on Scripture. It was also reported that a statement on the Antichrist was nearing completion, and that extensive agreement respecting the principles underlying an evaluation of the Scout movement was brought to light. In October the Joint Committee adopted the final form of the statement on Scripture and on the Antichrist.

All four constituent synods of the Synodical Conference met in 1959. Missouri, Wisconsin, the ELS, and the Slovak Synod all adopted the statement on Scripture. Wisconsin also adopted the statement on the Antichrist. Missouri adopted the statement on Scripture but stated that it should not adopt the statement on the Antichrist until the Synodical Conference in convention had the opportunity to discuss it. Missouri devoted much time to the discussion of theological issues but also reaffirmed its 1944 statement on Scouting.

The conclave of theologians (from Australia, England, Germany, India, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, and Japan) met in Oakland, California, in 1959. The Conclave met again in Thiensville, Wisconsin, in 1960, but was not able to prevent the break that was soon to be declared.

For several years there had been a trickle of pastors, professors and congregations leaving the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods. Those who left believed that a break with Missouri was overdue and that the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods were becoming guilty of Missouri's unionism. In 1960 those pastors and congregations organized the Church of the Lutheran Confession.

The Wisconsin Synod had instructed its theologians on the Joint Committee to continue to work until agreement in doctrine and practice had been attained, or until an impasse was reached indicating that our testimony had been rejected. In May 1960 the Committee declared that such an impasse had been reached on the doctrine of fellowship. The Wisconsin Synod and the ELS produced statements in accord with the historic teaching of the Synodical Conference that no fellowship can be practiced without full doctrinal agreement. In opposition to this "unit concept" of fellowship the Slovak and Missouri Synods maintained a distinction between joint prayer and prayer fellowship and contended for a "growing edge" of fellowship toward those outside their synods. The 1960 Synodical Conference convention had been recessed until May 1961, but could not resolve the impasse on fellowship when the convention reconvened. The Wisconsin Synod in convention, having received the report of the impasse on fellowship, voted to terminate fellowship with the Missouri Synod by a vote of 124-49.

Aftermath

In 1962 both the ELS and the Wisconsin Synod asked the Synodical Conference to dissolve itself. When that did not happen both synods withdrew from Synodical Conference membership in 1963. The Synodical Conference met for the last time in 1966. The next year the Missouri Synod passed resolutions dissolving the

Conference and asked the Slovaks to do the same. Within a few years the Slovak Synod merged with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

The Wisconsin Synod had been able to become a founding member of the Synodical Conference in 1872 only because it had come to a correct understanding of the scriptural doctrine and practice of fellowship after its early years of confessional confusion. That understanding compelled the Wisconsin Synod to leave the Synodical Conference some ninety years later when Missouri departed from that same doctrine and practice of fellowship in spite of firm and patient admonition. It was only by God's grace that our synod came into the Conference, and it was only by his grace that our synod was preserved in the heat of that controversy that led to the Conference's dissolution.

This account of the dissolution of the Synodical Conference does not begin to address the difficulties and the heartaches experienced by members of the Wisconsin Synod. The struggles were long and often bitter and tiresome. A precious fellowship was lost. But with the struggles also came blessing as pastors and parishioners were forced into Scripture to find God-pleasing answers for the troubling questions of the day.

Some predicted that breaking with Missouri would be the end of the Wisconsin Synod. History tells a different story. After the break the synod entered on a period of rapid expansion on synodical campuses as young people presented themselves to be trained for the preaching and teaching ministry. The home and world mission program of our synod blossomed and bore fruit beyond all expectation. That story, however, will be the subject of our final installment.

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