

# Fellowship Then and Now

*From the WELS Commission on Doctrinal Matters*

[Concerning the Impasse in the Intersynodical Discussions on Church Fellowship]

## Preface

In the June 19, 1960, issue Of *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Pastor Irwin J. Habeck reported the following concerning the May 17-19, 1960, meeting of the Joint Synodical Conference Doctrinal Committees: "Our Commission on Doctrinal Matters must regretfully express the conviction that in our efforts to resolve our differences with respect to the Scriptural principles of church fellowship - differences which we hold to be divisive - an impasse has been reached."

This very saddening development took place after intensive discussions on the principles of church fellowship had been carried on for several years in the meetings of the Synodical Conference Joint Doctrinal Committees. The impasse was recognized and declared by our Wisconsin Synod Commission on Doctrinal Matters on the basis of a written document. This document was one which the Doctrinal Unity Committee of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod had presented after all these discussions, in advance of the May meeting referred to above. The purpose of this written statement was to set forth the well-considered convictions of Missouri's Doctrinal Unity Committee concerning the principles which are to govern the exercise of church fellowship.

However, Pastor Habeck also made this statement in the same *Northwestern Lutheran* article: "The Committee of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod informed us that the document which they presented was a study document which would be reviewed and revised before it goes into print. After it appears in print the members of our Synod will be able to study it and then to pass judgment upon the action of our Commission." Such judgment the members of our Synod are able to pass now that the *Four Statements on Fellowship* have been published and sent out to all pastors, teachers, and congregational chairmen within the Synodical Conference, in accordance with a convention resolution of this body in August. The Missouri Synod's *The Theology of Fellowship, Part II, Principles Governing the Exercise of Fellowship* (pp. 39-47) is the revised edition of the original Missouri Synod document on the basis of which our Commission had recognized and declared an impasse at the close of the May meeting. As the preface of the *Four Statements on Fellowship* States, this revision of the original document was adopted by the joint theological faculties of the St. Louis and Springfield Seminaries on, October 29, 1960.

During the meeting on January 24, 1961, of our Synod's Advisory Committee on Doctrinal Matters, which includes the Commission on Doctrinal Matters; this revised Missouri Synod document on the *Principles Governing the Exercise of Fellowship* was studied and the following resolutions were adopted:

WHEREAS, THE THEOLOGY OF FELLOWSHIP, PART II, of the Missouri Synod, contained in the pamphlet *Four Statements on Fellowship*, does not in substance differ from Part II, submitted on April 29, 1960, by the Missouri Synod's Committee on Doctrinal Unity, the discussion of which resulted in our commission's declaration of an impasse in the deliberations on fellowship; and

WHEREAS, The changes are either changes in wording or further elaborations and expansions which, if anything, make the objectionable viewpoints on fellowship even more apparent; therefore be it  
*Resolved*, That it is the consensus of this body that the changed Part II does not alter the situation from what it was when the impasse was declared; and be it further  
*Resolved*, That the above resolutions be reported through our church papers.

During its meeting on January 24-26, 1961, our Advisory Committee on Doctrinal Matters likewise resolved to submit for publication in our *Northwestern Lutheran*, in successive installments, a document entitled *Fellowship Then and Now*, which had been prepared by a subcommittee consisting of Professors Gerald Hoe-

necke, Joh. P. Meyer, and Armin W. Schuetze. The purpose of this series of articles is to state very concisely, first of all, the two conflicting positions on church fellowship involved in the present impasse, and then to show at length that in its position on fellowship our Wisconsin Synod Commission on Doctrinal Matters is merely restating the historical Scriptural principles of church fellowship which have been jointly held in our Lutheran synods both before and since the founding of the Synodical Conference.

Carl Lawrenz, Chairman,  
Commission on Doctrinal Matters

## Introduction

In May 1960, our Wisconsin Synod Commission on Doctrinal Matters declared that there is an impasse with the Missouri Synod Committee on Doctrinal Unity in the discussions on the doctrine of fellowship. What does this mean? It means that the principles we enunciate in our Statement on Fellowship and those expressed by the Missouri Synod in its Theology of Fellowship, Part II, are not in agreement. It means that after thorough discussion each is convinced that it must abide by and uphold its position. That is an impasse.

Our Commission declared this to the Joint Union Committees of the Synodical Conference and reported it to our Synod and its Districts, and to the Synodical Conference Convention last August.

What are the conflicting positions?

**The Wisconsin Synod Position:** Concerning fellowship we hold, as Luther once stated it, “that there must be either genuine unity or none at all,” or as a church historian has stated the position of the Early Church: “There is only complete church fellowship or none at all.” Hence the *same Scriptural principles* (see the Wisconsin Synod Statement on Fellowship, Part B) govern every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith, for example, pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in worship, fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian education, in Christian charity.

**The Missouri Synod Position:** On the one hand, they correctly hold that “the functioning, repenting church . . . is able to bear with and help the weak and at the same time has the inner strength to confront and exclude the persistent errorist.” On the other hand, they hold that in some manifestations of fellowship, such as joint prayer, the action is not determined by the above Scriptural principles that govern all expressions of fellowship. They hold that “a decision as to the propriety or impropriety of joint prayer” must be based on a consideration of “the *situation* in which such prayer is offered, the *character* of the prayer itself, its *purpose*, and its *probable effect* on those who unite in the prayer.” (Theology of Fellowship, Part H.)

To bring the differences in principles more sharply into focus, we ask these questions

1. Should church fellowship be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith? Does joint prayer, for instance, in principle presuppose the same fundamental unity of faith as does joint communion?

To this question we answer *yes*, and the Missouri Synod answers *no*.

2. Do the same principles govern all joint expressions, manifestations, and demonstrations of a common faith? Do the same principles which apply in determining who can practice pulpit and altar fellowship apply also in deciding who may pray together and jointly engage in various kinds of spiritual work?

To this question we answer *yes*, and the Missouri Synod answers *no*.

It is in the field of practice that these differences in principle become forcefully apparent and cause serious offense. For example, theological professors of the Missouri Synod attend the meetings of Lutheran seminary professors at which they join in prayers and devotions with representatives of synods with whom they are not in doctrinal agreement, not even in regard to the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. Other similar cases could be cited. While we are ready under proper circumstances to discuss doctrinal differences with representatives of other synods, we hold that joint prayer and devotions at such meetings are contrary to the Scriptural principles of fellowship.

In view of the fact that for many decades there was complete agreement on fellowship within the Synodical Conference and so also between us and the Missouri Synod, it is obvious that somewhere a change has taken place. Otherwise we should still be agreed. We therefore ask: Which of the above two positions is the historical, Scriptural position of the Synodical Conference? We shall let history and the fathers in the Synodical Conference give the answer. The Scripture proof for the correctness of this position is given in our Statement on Fellowship.

The material will be arranged chronologically in six chapters: I. The Period of Groping, II. The Founding of the Synodical Conference, III. The Election Controversy, IV. The Time After Confessional Lines Had Been Clearly Drawn, V. Theory and Practice, VI. Before the Founding of the Synodical Conference.

## **I. The Period of Groping**

What were the principles of fellowship that guided our forefathers in the years preceding the founding of the Synodical Conference? In our Introduction we stated the two conflicting positions that are being held in the Synodical Conference at the present time. Which of the two did they follow? We suggest that it might prove helpful to review these positions from the former article before proceeding with this present section.

In our outline, we called the years before the founding of the Synodical Conference “the Period of Groping.”

The fellowship principles followed during this period become evident from the conduct of our forefathers at so-called free conferences and at official colloquies between representatives of various synods.

### **A. The Free Conferences from 1856 to 1859**

Much is being made of the fact that the sessions of the Free Conferences, called by Dr. Walther and conducted during the years 1856 to 1859, were opened with joint prayer although the participants came from synods that were not in confessional fellowship. What was the situation? If this is correctly understood, it will be apparent that the same principles were followed which throughout the years were enunciated in Synodical Conference literature and also now are expressed in our Commission’s Statement on Fellowship.

At that time a great number of Lutheran synods were united in the General Synod, organized in 1820. The confessional stand of that body was, generally speaking, unionistic. In the General Synod’s constitution the Lutheran Confessions were not even mentioned. There was, however, also an increasing number of men in the General Synod who defended the Confessions.

In 1885 S. S. Schmucker, “the most influential man in the Lutheran General Synod,” anonymously published a statement called the *Definite Platform*. This was to serve as a guide, both “Doctrinal and Disciplinary, for Ev. Luth. District Synods, Constructed in Accordance with the Principles of the General Synod.” This *Platform* denied baptismal regeneration and the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. It rejected Christ’s descent into hell, eliminated the Athanasian Creed, and insisted on the observance of Sunday in the fashion of the Jewish Sabbath. These mutilations were added to the *Augsburg Confession*, which in this altered shape was to be considered as the “American Recension [Revision] of the Augsburg Confession.”

Although the *Definite Platform* was never adopted by the General Synod, and only by a few of the district synods, it caused a great stir among the members. Many of them, in spite of the laxness of the General Synod, wanted to stand on the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession*. Yet because of the prevailing laxness there was much unclarity and much uncertain groping regarding the truth.

The confessional stand of the nominally Lutheran General Synod and of its constituent districts was indeed “in flux” and in confusion.

In 1856 Dr. Walther, in the Foreword to Volume II of *Lehre und Wehre*, the theological magazine of the Missouri Synod, suggested the calling of free conferences of such Lutherans as subscribed to the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession* without reservation, to discuss the situation and to pave the way for a doctrinally united, truly Lutheran Church in North America. Having received encouragement from numerous favorable replies, he published an invitation, signed by himself and four other men from St. Louis. It read: “The undersigned

ministers of the Ev. Luth. Church in the United States, with the conviction that the unity and the wellbeing of our Lutheran Zion will be greatly advanced through the free expression of opinions regarding the various interests of our Church in this land by brethren who are *united in faith*, herewith extend an invitation to all members of the Ev. Luth. Church in the United States *who hold the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to be a true presentation of the teachings of the Word of God* to meet with them . . . in a free and brotherly conference concerning the status and needs of the Church in America” (*Lehre und Wehre*, 1856, p. 186f. -- emphasis ours).

The following points should be noted regarding these Free Conferences:

1. The invitation was based on a wholehearted acceptance of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. This was done over against the mutilations Offered by the *Definite Platform*. Under the circumstances, wholehearted acceptance of the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession* showed a readiness to submit to the full truth of the Scriptures. The account of the first Free Conference reports: “The Conference agreed to convince itself thoroughly that all its members truly and faithfully confessed themselves to the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession* and that each one who was present truly accepted it without reservation according to the plain meaning of the words” (*Lutheraner*-German churchpaper of the Missouri Synod--1856, p. 33 ).

2. The invitation was not extended to church bodies, but was a general call for individuals who wanted to be confessional Lutherans to step forth. (It is inexact when the *Lutheran Cyclopedia* calls the participants in the Free Conferences “representatives” from the various synods.) In the report on the second Free Conference (1857) the statement is recorded that “the Conference declared from its very beginning that its purpose was not to be a meeting and ‘powwow’ for people of all shades of faiths, if only they called themselves Lutheran, but that only such persons would be recognized as members who subscribe to the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession* without reservation” (*Lutheraner*, 1858, p. 84 ).

Another question required answering in that connection, as reported in the *Lutheraner*: “This led to the question as to how we are to look upon those who indeed for themselves accept the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, but who belong to a church body that does not recognize the binding force of this confession as a symbol . . . . This question was answered in this way, that we acknowledge such as brethren as long as they testify with vigor against the prevailing errors and for the truth. It was also stated that we consider it their duty to continue membership in their respective church bodies as long as there still is a basis for hope of improvement” (*Lutheraner*, 1856, p. 50 ) .

Thus the fellowship expressed at the Free Conferences was not with the unionistic General Synod, but with whoever stepped forward with a positive confession for the truth and against the General Synod’s laxness.

3. Therefore, since the Free Conferences consisted of men who confessed unreserved acceptance of the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, there was present a fundamental unity. Whatever errors one or the other may have held, was a matter of weakness and not of persistence. To refuse joint prayer under such circumstances would have been a violation of the brotherhood.

## **B. Colloquies with the Buffalo Synod and the Iowa Synod**

In 1866, representatives of the Missouri Synod met in a colloquy with representatives of the Buffalo Synod. In the following year a similar meeting was held with representatives of the Iowa Synod. The reports of both colloquies make mention of the devotional services with which all meetings were opened. Did our forefathers thereby practice joint prayer with persistent errorists, which however could be justified on the basis of the evaluation of the situation and the character, purpose, and probable effect of the prayer? We must again consider the historical situation.

The confessional position of the Lutheran Church bodies in America was still “in flux.” It still was a period of groping.

In the Buffalo Synod, founded in 1845, the chief leader had been Grabau. He soon revealed that he held certain errors, especially concerning the doctrine of the church and ministry, and that he very persistently clung to them. In 1866 he, together with a small group, left the Buffalo Synod. The *Lutheraner* described the situation in the Buffalo Synod as follows: “When last spring (1866) Grabau revealed himself in his synod as a tyrant and hypocrite by arbitrarily deposing a brother in the ministry with the help of his trustees and driving him out, and

would accept no admonition, indeed when he finally with four pastors left his own synod and organized a new one, *then many began to have doubts also as to his doctrine*" (*Lutheraner*, 1867, p. 82--emphasis ours). The Buffalo Synod accepted the invitation of the Missouri Synod for a colloquy, stating that they wanted to do everything they could "with the gracious help of God to arrive at unity of doctrine and peace and Christian reconciliation" (*Lutheraner*, 1866, p. 28). Under the circumstances they could hardly be considered as such who were set and hardened in error. They were men whose doctrinal position was somewhat uncertain, but who were looking for the truth and willing to bow to the Word of God.

To understand the Missouri Synod's relationship toward the Iowa Synod at the colloquy of 1867, we must remember that in 1866 and 1867 the General Council was organized. Since the General Synod continued in its unionism, the General Council was to provide a spiritual home for such Lutherans as held faithfully to the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession*. However, the General Council also proved inadequate because it failed to take a clear and definite stand with regard to the so-called Four Points (Lodgery, Pulpit Fellowship, Altar Fellowship, Chiliasm).

Among the synods which for this reason refused to join the General Council was the Iowa Synod. This showed that the Iowa Synod was in earnest with its acceptance of the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession*. (The Wisconsin Synod had first joined the General Council, but then left it when further testimony appeared to be of no avail.)

The dividing line separating the various synods was the stand which a body confessed with respect to the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession*. There was a fundamental unity drawing these confessional bodies together, although clarity was often woefully lacking.

Thus when representatives of the Missouri and of the Iowa Synods met for a colloquy, the question was not: Can unity be attained? but: Can unity, threatened by some error, be preserved? The aim was to overcome the unclarity and to avert a breach.

Since basic unity of confession, though threatened by error, was present between Missouri and Iowa, opening the session of the Colloquy with joint prayer was in place. This was hardly joint prayer with representatives of bodies who were persistently adhering to an error.

## II. The Founding of the Synodical Conference

We are concerning ourselves with the principles of fellowship that have been followed in the Synodical Conference and its constituent synods throughout the years. Such a study, we believe, will show that the position of our Synod and of our Commission on Doctrinal Matters is simply a reaffirmation of this position. We believe it will also show that the position expressed in the Missouri Synod's *Theology of Fellowship* is a departure. In this section we shall study the position as it was expressed at the time of the founding of the Synodical Conference and during the election controversy.

When the General Council was founded in 1867, the hope was that it would be a truly confessional Lutheran body. This hope, as was pointed out in the previous section, did not materialize. However, it did help to clarify the confessional stand of the various Lutheran bodies.

In 1872, six synods who held to the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession* without reservation, among them the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods, united to form the Synodical Conference. A preliminary meeting held in November 1871 resolved to publish a memorandum (*Denkschrift*) that contained an essay entitled: "A Statement of the reasons why the synods that are uniting in a synodical conference were unable to join any of the existing associations of synods in America." What fellowship principles were expressed at that time, principles on which the uniting synods were agreed? In pointing out why they could not join the erroristic General Synod, a general statement of principles was made. After Romans 16:17 and Titus 3:10 were quoted (in a footnote six additional Scripture passages were printed), the statement was made: "In these and similar passages of Holy Scripture God expressly and earnestly commands us not to remain in church-brotherly fellowship with false teachers and heretical people, much less to seek their fellowship or to enter in upon fraternal associations. On the contrary, we are earnestly and as a matter of principle to flee from and avoid

them” (*Denkschrift*, p. 16). Do not expressions like “church-brotherly fellowship” and “fraternal associations” include every manifestation of fellowship? Does this statement not apply the same set of principles to every form of fraternal association, to joint church work, to joint prayer, as well as to pulpit and altar fellowship?

That it is to be so understood, becomes even clearer when in this memorandum they assert “that every difference in doctrine in its very nature essentially destroys the bond of church-brotherly fellowship and that hence also any eventual practice of such fellowship through pulpit and altar fellowship, through the working together for church purposes, etc., is of course a wrong that is committed contrary to God’s express prohibition and is sin” (p. 26). What else but church fellowship as a unit concept can be understood by the words, “We must continue to condemn *every* church-brotherly practice of fellowship, especially through pulpit and altar fellowship” (p. 27--emphasis ours)? One of the points they mention as needing correction in the General Council is this: “The working together with errorists in the affairs of the kingdom of God, especially in mixed associations and the like” (p. 31). Why should that be corrected if it was not considered to be unionism?

It may be noted that quite frequently pulpit and altar fellowship are mentioned by themselves. This may give the impression as though they were placed in a category of their own. We must keep the historical situation in mind. There were Lutherans at that time who were not ready to join in all forms of church work with the Reformed. They were not ready to express fellowship with the Reformed by forming one organization with them. But they did not hesitate to permit a Reformed member to participate with them in Holy Communion. They were ready to let a Reformed pastor step into their pulpit. In opposition to such practice it was emphasized especially that also pulpit and altar fellowship are an expression of church-brotherly relations and may not be practiced with errorists. That all expressions of fellowship, however, were considered to be essentially one, becomes apparent when they say: “If it is sinful to turn away from our Lutheran altars and pulpits, those in other denominations whom we hold to be Christians, then the entire separate existence of our Lutheran Church is sinful and to be condemned” (p. 27).

How these principles were put into practice, we can see from the answer that was given in 1874 to an invitation of the General Council to a colloquy of all Lutherans who subscribe to the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession*. The convention of the Synodical Conference replied: “The Synodical Conference is glad to declare its readiness to take part in the free conference, proposed by the honorable General Council, of such Lutherans as subscribe to the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession* without reserve for the purpose of striving for an agreement” (*Proceedings*, 1874, p. 44).

In the discussion of this resolution the question was asked: What would we do if people from the General Synod have been invited? This was the reply: “We must naturally seek agreement with such first as are closest to us. But that is not the General Synod. The acceptance of the *Augsburg Confession* by the General Synod is manifestly a matter of form only. To confer with such nominal Lutherans has so far never been considered as salutary by any of our synods, particularly in the presence of a third party. Or can we wish to have our opponents as allies? That would be definitely un-Lutheran” (p. 44). Attention was, however, called to the fact “that individual members also of the General Synod could for their person take part in the conference with our consent. Only individuals are involved, not synodical bodies” (p. 44).

Our fathers were ready to confer with those Lutherans who were seriously concerned about their confessionalism and sought unity of faith. They, however, considered it unsalutary to confer with nominal Lutherans. To do so in the presence of a third party with whom they were also not in full agreement, they called “definitely un-Lutheran” and thus offensive.

### III. The Election Controversy

The election controversy disturbed the Synodical Conference during the first decade of its existence. It arose from an attempt to answer the question: Why are some chosen and not others?—a question not answered in the Bible. What effect did the doctrinal difference that was revealed in this controversy have upon the fellowship relations in the Synodical Conference? What principles of fellowship were applied?

At its Fort Wayne, Indiana, convention in 1881 the Missouri Synod concerned itself with defining its “position, as such, in the election controversy that is currently troubling the synod.” The *Proceedings* contain a rather detailed account of the discussions and resolutions. In regard to those in their midst who had not as yet arrived at full clarity and so were not ready to confess themselves fully to the position of the Missouri Synod, they expressed willingness to continue to deal with them. On the other hand, they stated that those who brought accusations and were disturbing the congregations must be considered and treated as enemies; they really should have stepped out of the synod. The report continues: “We desire no unionism of any kind. We have always rejected and avoided any and every union, even of a merely external nature, with those who indeed called themselves Lutheran but failed to teach Lutheran doctrine; with God’s gracious help we shall continue on that course” (*Missouri Synod Proceedings*, 1881, p. 30 ).

After referring to the Lutheran fathers who severed fraternal relations with the Cryptocalvinists (Lutherans who held Calvin’s view of the Lord’s Supper), the report continues: “Also we say openly and honestly to everyone who teaches differently from us, even though he appeals to the Confession of the Lutheran Church: We do not belong together and so must go our separate ways. By that we do not say that our opponents are heretics, nor do we condemn them. We also do not do that to the Evangelicals and the Reformed. But this is what we say: We can no longer walk together. We also cannot pray with one another any longer. For you will pray for our and we for your conversion. But such joint praying is an abomination in the sight of God” (p. 30f.).

To instruct its delegates to the Synodical Conference convention that was to meet the following year (1882), the Missouri Synod convention passed the following resolutions: “1. You are to sit together in consultation as a church assembly with no one who has publicly accused us of Calvinism. 2. You are to recognize as a member of the Synodical Conference no synod that has raised the accusation of Calvinism against us” (p. 45).

At the October 1882 meeting of the Synodical Conference in Chicago, the Missouri Synod delegates raised a protest against permitting Prof. F. A. Schmidt of the Norwegian Synod to serve as a delegate at the convention. A statement of principles preceded the actual protest. We bring a few quotations so that we may see what principles guided them at that time. While protesting the seating of Prof. Schmidt as a delegate, the Missouri Synod men did not want to be understood as being opposed to all colloquies with errorists. They said: “To hold a disputation or colloquy with someone who has erred in the faith, even with one who is clearly a heretic, is not a violation of the Word of God” (*Missouri Synod Proceedings*, 1882, p. 6). Regarding such colloquies, they had this to say: “Such intercourse with an errorist on the part of one who holds to the true faith is far from comprising a denial of the truth. Much rather is it an act of confession. The true believer faces the errorist, not as one who is a recognized brother in the faith, but as an enemy of the divine truth who must be overcome by him” (p. 7). That surely would rule out all expressions of fellowship at such colloquies.

When must the practice of fellowship with one who has fallen into error cease? They said: “Here, however, on the basis of the Word of God a twofold distinction must be made, first as to the nature of the error, and secondly as to the nature and conduct of the errorist” (p. 9). As we hear this, we may be led to ask: Did the fathers hold that certain errors are not divisive, even if persistently upheld? Let us hear what else they had to say.

“If an error does not militate directly or indirectly against the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, if it is not a fundamental error, one that destroys the foundation of faith, then the appearance in the church of such an error does not in itself put an end to the unity of faith, doctrine, and confession within that church. Hence it also does not put an end to fellowship-brother fellowship, church fellowship, and fellowship in the sacraments . . . \* Such ‘weak ones’ are not to be avoided; on the contrary, the Word of God says: ‘Him that is weak in the faith receive ye’ (Rom. 14:1)” (p. 9).

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\* This means the fellowship among individuals as brothers in the faith, the fellowship among churches and congregations, and the fellowship in the use of the Lord’s Supper (*bruederliche, kirchliche, and Sakramentsgemeinschaft*)

“However, according to the Word of God, even gross errors that destroy the foundation of faith are by no means as yet in every case sufficient cause immediately to break off all brother fellowship and church fellowship with those who entertain and express them” (p. 9).

Thus they expressed themselves about those who must be looked upon as weak brethren. We are not immediately to separate from them. But about those who persist in their errors they had this to say: “The same Apostle (Paul), however, followed an entirely different course with those who not only entertained destructive errors, but in spite of being repeatedly admonished and convicted of their errors clung stubbornly and obstinately to them, in fact sought to mislead others from the truth, to create division and offense and to gain a following for themselves. With such the holy Apostles commanded the orthodox Christians to break off all brother fellowship and church fellowship” (p. 10).

Here they speak of “destructive errors.” A fundamental error when persisted in is in its very nature a destructive one. But also errors in nonfundamental doctrines become destructive when they are persistently upheld against the clear revelation of God’s Word so that one obstinately sets up his own thinking over against the Word of God. They undermine the foundation of our faith, the Holy Scriptures.

Bear with, instruct the weak; avoid the persistent errorist—these were the only principles of fellowship our fathers in the Synodical Conference had learned from the Scriptures, principles applicable to all expressions of fellowship.

#### **IV. The Time After Confessional Lines had been Clearly Drawn**

After the colloquies with the Buffalo and Iowa Synods (see section I) and after the Election Controversy (see section III) the confessional lines of the Lutheran bodies in America had been clearly drawn. The doctrinal position of the various synods was quite fixed. The member synods of the Synodical Conference stood for a genuine acceptance of the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession* without reservation. On the other hand, the General Synod through its lax position came very near to a complete rejection of the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession*. Then there was the General Council, whose position continued to be one of “riding the fence,” since it did not express itself clearly on the “four points” mentioned earlier. The Ohio Synod had left the Synodical Conference in the Election Controversy, persisting in its false views on election and conversion. The Iowa Synod held to its unscriptural view on open questions as it had been revealed in the colloquy. Similarly the Buffalo Synod continued to hold to its old errors. It was quite clear where each synod stood.

#### **The Practice at the Free Conferences**

For this reason, when between 1903 and 1906 free conferences were held at which members of the Ohio and Iowa Synods met with men from the synods of the Synodical Conference, our fathers objected to joint prayers at these meetings. They could not regard those with whom they met as weak brethren. Dr. Bente, professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, wrote about this in *Lehre und Wehre*: “The men from the Iowa and Ohio synods do not want to be considered as weak brethren, and if they did, we could not so regard them.... From the testimony of Scripture and of the Lutheran confessions the truth has been presented to them, not only once or twice, but perhaps a hundred times. But they have rejected all instruction.... No, as weak brethren who are only erring... we cannot regard our former opponents” (1905, p. 98). Hence there could be no joint praying with them.

#### **The Practice in the Twenties**

In the 1920’s attempts were made by the Synodical Conference synods and the Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo Synods to arrive at agreement. The discussions of the representatives of these synods resulted in the *Chicago Theses* (1928), a doctrinal statement which seemed to show that agreement had been reached. When the Missouri Synod, however, found this statement unacceptable, the theses no longer served any practical purpose. As to the meetings, although we have no documentary evidence for this, one of our representatives, Prof. Joh. P.



Meyer, reports that there were no joint prayers until the last meetings, at which the conferees believed they had reached full doctrinal agreement. Quite correctly they then conducted the meetings with joint prayer.

During this whole time the various theologians within the Synodical Conference expressed themselves in regard to the Scriptural principles of fellowship. The Missouri Synod's *Theology of Fellowship, Part II*, refers particularly to joint prayer as the aspect of church fellowship in which the evaluation of the situation, character, purpose, and probable effect of the prayer must be the determining factor. We shall therefore bring quotations that make special reference to joint prayer or prayer fellowship. For the sake of brevity we have in general chosen only one quotation from each of the Missouri Synod theologians quoted, preferring to let a larger number of them be heard. This will also show the unanimity that was present throughout those years even into the 1940's. The men quoted held leading positions and were recognized as spokesmen for the Missouri Synod, so that their statements reflect the official position of this body.

### **What Spokesmen for Missouri Said**

In 1895, District President Wegener read a lengthy exposition on twelve theses about prayer to the Southern District of the Missouri Synod. He wrote: "People who join in prayer must be of one mind, one faith, one hope, for joint prayer is an expression of a common faith. For that reason Christians cannot pray together with the heterodox" (*Souther District Proceedings*, 1895, p. 97).

Dr. August Graebner, professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, in an essay read to the Nebraska District in 1903 stated: "From the outset prayer fellowship has been common worship of God, and where common worship cannot be practiced, Christians are not to carry on prayer fellowship. Take note of it well: with whom they were of one mind and continued in the Apostles' doctrine and in the breaking of bread, with whom they were united in hearing the Word of God and in the use of the sacraments, in the use of the means of grace, with those the first Christians also continued to observe prayer fellowship . . . . Prayer is a part of the divine worship" (*Nebraska District [Mo. Synod] Proceedings*, 1903, p. 74).

When the synods of the Synodical Conference were criticized for not practicing joint prayer at the free conferences in the early 1900's referred to above, Dr. Bente in *Lehre und Wehre* defended this practice. He wrote: "The prerequisite for prayer fellowship and church fellowship is unity of faith. God has expressly forbidden us to practice church fellowship with such with whom we are not united in the truth" (1904, p. 223f.). In a lengthy article in 1905, he wrote: "If anything is clearly taught in the Scriptures, not only indirectly, but directly, then it is just this that with such who cannot be regarded as weak in understanding, but must be considered persistent errorists we are not permitted to practice church and brother fellowship" (p. 101). Quoting Romans 16 :17, he stated

"The Apostle speaks here of people in the Roman congregation who came up with a doctrine that differed from the doctrine they had heard from the Apostles, who clung to that doctrine, and sought to gain adherents for it.... And what is the command of the Apostle to all Christians in regard to such false teachers? Is it perhaps: Practice pulpit fellowship, church fellowship, altar fellowship with them, or at least conduct liturgical prayer services with them? On the contrary, he says: 'Avoid them'" ( p. 101f.). Regarding II John 11, 12, he commented: "Clearly John here speaks of church fellowship and brotherly intercourse (and so also of prayer fellowship and fellowship in worship) with errorists.... He judges that Christians who engage in such church and brother fellowship with false teachers become partakers of their sins. Also this passage requires and justifies the conduct of the Synodical Conference at Detroit. Through a joint fraternal prayer service the Synodical Conference would have defiled itself with the errors of its opponents. It would have confessed itself to their errors. At least, it would thereby have declared to its opponents that their errors are not dangerous, are insignificant, a matter of indifference, and not especially obstructive of the Christian truth" (p. 103f.).

Dr. Carl Manthey-Zorn's Questions on Christian Topics (1931) is well known. He asks the question: "May an orthodox Christian in any case unite in prayer with such as are unorthodox?" He answers: "By no means. Full well do we know, and we thank God for the fact, that there is a communion of saints which embraces both orthodox and unorthodox Christians and unites them, in humble and penitent faith in Jesus

Christ, into one family of children of God. But in its outward appearing and works the orthodox Church is rigidly separate from the unorthodox. And so God wills it should be. ‘Avoid them.’ Rom. 16 :17” (p. 241f.) .

In 1919, Pastor W. Schoenfeld wrote a pamphlet which was issued by the Missouri Synod Committee on the American Legion. The committee members, Drs. Dau, Fritz, and Doerfler, assumed all responsibility for its contents. In this pamphlet, entitled “Promiscuous Prayer, Unamerican-Unbiblical,” we read: “Let the Christian also ponder deeply the admonition of St. Paul in Rom. 16:17: ‘I beseech you, brethren, mark those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned, and avoid them.’ If, as the Apostle here admonishes, Christ’s disciples must avoid the schismatics, who by false teaching have disrupted Christ’s Church, how can they join them in prayer?” (p. 16).

Dr. Theo. Graebner, professor at St. Louis and author of numerous Missouri Synod publications, wrote in 1920 in the *Homiletical Magazine*, a Missouri Synod professional publication for preachers: “As for joint prayers, remember that He in whose name we pray is the Truth, and that the God whom we worship is the God of Truth, and that promiscuous prayer is so evident a violation of the Christian’s innermost principle of spiritual life that the simple Lutherans of Reformation days suffered banishment, tortures, and death, rather than give even a semblance of denial by compliance with the demands that they worship hi forms which implied a concession of error” (p. 231ff.).

In an essay on Unionism, Dr. F. Pieper, a former president of the Missouri Synod and successor of Dr. Walther as president of Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, in 1924 said to the Oregon and Washington District: “The Holy Scriptures very emphatically and in manifold ways teach that *all fellowship* with false doctrine is forbidden by God and is harmful to the Church.” On II John 10, 11, he said: “God here forbids Unionism, religious fellowship with those who are known to be false teachers. To pray with them, or to partake of the Lord’s Supper with them, would mean to consent to, and to become ‘partakers of their evil works’ “ (*Oregon and Washington District Proceedings*, 1924, p. 5, 8—emphasis ours).

Dr. Theodore Engelder, professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, wrote: “The passages which prohibit pulpit fellowship and altar fellowship apply with equal force to prayer fellowship. Uniting with errorists in joint worship in general, and common prayer in particular, is not avoiding them, Rom. 16:17, but recognizing their position as God-pleasing, II John 10, 11. Furthermore joint prayer like joint communion is the outward expression of inward fellowship.... If we could fellowship the representatives of false teaching in uniting with them in prayer, we could consistently exchange pulpits with them and meet with them at a common altar” (quoted in the *Confessional Lutheran*, February, 1946, p. 18f.).

In 1937 Dr. William Arndt, professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, read an essay on “Christian Prayer” to the Oklahoma District at whose request it was printed also in pamphlet form. Thesis XXIV reads: “Joint prayer is inculcated by God and given a special promise. We must not overlook that rejection of the Triune God and of Christ and persistent adherence to false teaching or to a sinful life form a barrier against joint prayer.” In carrying out this thesis, he states: “That we are not going too far when we say that adherence to false doctrine is a barrier to prayer fellowship is evident from the insistence with which Jesus has commanded that we remain faithful to everything that He has taught.” That refusal of joint prayer with errorists is not a loveless act, but is motivated by a deep concern for their spiritual welfare, Dr. Arndt showed in the following words: “In humility, with fear and trembling, we must do our duty and point to what is wrong, rebuking and reproving with all patience (cf. II Thess. 3:6). If we are filled with the Spirit of Christ, it will soon become apparent that what we are condemning in refusing prayer fellowship to adherents of false teaching is not the person we are dealing with but violations of God’s revelation which we observe and to which the majesty of God’s Word compels us to draw attention. For it is undeniable that *his recognition of the errors into which he has fallen is of greater importance to him than my prayer fellowship*” (Pamphlet *Christian Prayer*, pp. 60, 64, 66--emphasis ours).

Dr. L. Fuerbringer, former president of Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, wrote in the *Lutheraner* in 1945: “According to the Scriptures only those should pray together who are of one mind and of one faith. Rom. 15:5, 6; Eph. 4:3-6” (1945, p. 164).

As late as 1946 Dr. Behnken, president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, said: “If such cooperation involves joint work in missions, in Christian education, in student welfare work, in joint services celebrating great events, then cooperation is just another name for pulpit, altar, and prayer fellowship. Without doctrinal agreement this spells compromise. It means yielding in doctrinal positions. Such fellowship will not stand in the light of Scripture” (quoted in the *Quartalschrift*, our theological quarterly, 1947, p. 68). Unfortunately already then the Missouri Synod was making a distinction between prayer fellowship and joint prayer.

These are only a few samples of many quotations that might be adduced. They clearly show the principles of fellowship, specifically prayer fellowship, that were held in the Missouri Synod and shared by the other Synodical Conference member synods. We still hold that they are the true Scriptural principles and it is these principles that our Statement on Fellowship reiterates.

## **V. Theory and Practice**

The changes which the Missouri Synod has made in its principles regarding fellowship relations, as revealed in its written statements, correspond to the changes made in her practice. This can be observed in a number of areas. We shall refer to five items here.

### **1. The distinction between prayer fellowship and joint prayer.**

In 1905, at a meeting of the Minnesota District of the Ohio Synod, a visiting Missouri Synod pastor remained seated during a devotion. The *Kirchenblatt*, the German churchpaper of the Iowa Synod, commented on this incident as follows: “It is one of the saddest errors of the Missouri conscience that it considers all joining in prayer as a practice of church fellowship.” To this Dr. Berate in *Lehre und Wehre* said among other things: “The *Kirchenblatt* of the Iowa Synod makes the whole matter very easy for itself. It simply claims that the prayer fellowship which the Ohio Synod men demanded was not church fellowship, and therefore the Missouri Synod man gave offense. That may be easy to say, but is hardly convincing” (1905, p. 327). At that time the Missouri Synod did not share the Iowa Synod view that there can be joint praying which is not church fellowship.

In 1944 this position of the Missouri Synod changed. Since that time a distinction is being made between joint prayer and prayer fellowship. At their convention in Saginaw, Michigan, in 1944 they, on the one hand, reaffirmed the position of their 1941 convention that “it be understood that no pulpit, altar, or prayer fellowship has been established between us and the American Lutheran Church.” On the other hand, the 1944 convention accepted also the following statement: “However, joint prayer at intersynodical conferences, asking God for His guidance and blessing upon the deliberations and discussions of His Word, does not militate against the resolution” (*Missouri Synod Proceedings*, p. 251). While the Missouri Synod recognized that they were not in prayer fellowship with the American Lutheran Church, still they declared that joint prayer could be practiced under certain conditions. Thus in 1944 the Missouri Synod expressed as its position the very one which it had condemned in the Iowa Synod in 1905. It now, too, finds that there can be joint prayers which are not prayer fellowship and therefore not church fellowship. Our Wisconsin Synod believes that the Missouri Synod position of 1905 was the Scripturally correct one.

### **2. Conferences of seminary students, faculty members, editors of churchpapers, and the like.**

As late as 1931 Dr. Theo. Graebner wrote in the *Concordia Theological Monthly*: “Naturally unionistic undertakings between members of the various synodical bodies as yet not in official fellowship with one another are multiplying. Typical of such relationships is the ‘fellowship meeting’ of Lutheran Seminary students, groups from eleven institutions being entertained at Columbus, Ohio, by the students of the Ohio Synod seminary.” Dr. Graebner exposed the unionistic spirit of these meetings by saying: “The differences which separate the synods represented do not in the least militate against the free and fraternal conduct of the meetings, which are an annual affair” (p. 576).

That was 30 years ago. Now not only the students of the Missouri Synod seminaries, but also the theological professors, editors of churchpapers, and similar groups, participate in such meetings with Lutherans not in doctrinal fellowship with the Synodical Conference. The invitations to these meetings, which have been sent also to us, announce programs which include joint prayer and devotions. The reports of these meetings often tell of the prayer fellowship that was practiced. We repeat the words of Dr. Graebner, written in 1931 in criticism of activities of church bodies outside the Synodical Conference, but now applicable to meetings in which also Missouri Synod men freely participate: “The differences which separate the synods represented do not in the least militate against the free and fraternal conduct of the meetings.”

### 3. Cooperation in mission activity.

Dr. Theo. Graebner Wrote in *The Lutheran Witness* in 1918: “No one believes that any Missouri Synod man would dare to propose, at this time, official synodical collaboration with the Reformed Sects in church-work. That is a late development, at which one does not arrive at a jump. On the other hand, the danger is ever present that, on the specious plea of advancing the cause of ‘Lutheranism,’ we be tempted to enter into fellowship with members of synods Lutheran in name, but only partly Lutheran in doctrine and practice. There is danger that we get a taste of applause and flattery; that we become eager for ‘recognition’ as a great church-body; that we compromise our doctrinal stand for the purpose of meeting emergencies. And the time to become aware of that danger is NOW, while our official relations to other bodies are still what they ought to be according to Scripture, and not later, when irreparable damage may have been done. Rev. Brenner tells us how unionists in the General Council chloroformed the conscience of the body. When they entered into working arrangements ( in the distinctly religious sphere) with the Reformed churches, they glazed the matter over by reporting that ‘the object of these conferences is purely that of counsel concerning the problems of foreign mission-work.’ *Only counsel; no fellowship; just consulting with one another. Thus does the camel push its nose into the tent. Let us keep our eyes open*” (p. 98ff.—emphasis ours).

In 1960 the Missouri Synod’s Board for Missions in North and South America joined the Division of American Missions of the National Council of Churches. *The Lutheran Witness* in reporting the application of the mission board for membership in the Division of American Missions stated: “The National Council of Churches is so structured that any denomination which does not hold NCC membership can nevertheless participate in a given division of the Council to the extent that its principles permit: *Such participation is primarily in the area of research and exchange of information*” (1960, No. 1, p. 16—emphasis ours). Although the statement is made that the “membership is conditioned by the phrase ‘to the extent that our principles permit,’” one, still wonders whether this is not the kind of relationship against which warnings were voiced in the above quotation from 1918.

### 4. Application of Romans 16:17.

In 1937 Dr. Wm. Arndt in his essay on “Christian Prayer” wrote, “Whoever is altering the teaching of Jesus thereby is creating a division in the Church, placing himself in opposition to all who adhere to Christ’s doctrine. We have been told by St. Paul that we must avoid such division-makers, Rom. 16:17. That implies, of course, that we do not have prayer fellowship with them. This same admonition holds with respect to those *who are not the originators but the perpetuators of the divisions*, carrying on the work of the captains of strife, discord, and disharmony by teaching the same errors as these men” (p. 65—emphasis ours).

In 1947 the late Dr. A. Grumm, a vice-president of the Missouri Synod, wrote an article entitled “Church Fellowship.” This appeared in Volume II of *The Abiding Word*, a centennial publication of the Missouri Synod consisting of a collection of doctrinal essays based on various articles that appeared in Missouri Synod publications during the first century of its history. He considered the question “What about the believers in churches with which we are not in outward fellowship because these churches uphold teachings that are contrary to God’s Word?” The answer he gives reads in part: “Does it seem impossible to you that sincere believers in Christ in churches where error is mixed with truth do not know that this error is taught and held in their midst? It is not impossible. Perhaps they have been born into that church

body, brought up in its teachings from early youth .... Yet the Cross of Christ has taken hold of their hearts .... They are truly fellow believers.

“However, you and I do not know this. God alone knows them that are His. All we can tell is that they have fellowship with those who teach and uphold the word of men as equal in authority with, or as taking the place of, God’s Word. They have set up a wall between themselves and us, not intentionally perhaps, but nevertheless a wall.... These believers, whom we are unable to recognize as such, have joined themselves with errorists. They have closed the door to active fellowship with themselves on our part” (p. 528f.). This article was based on three essays that appeared in the Missouri Synod in its early years. Although no specific reference is made to Romans 16:17, yet its injunction to avoid is recognized as applying not only to the false teachers, but also to those who follow them, even when they do not realize that falsehood is being taught.

Now the Missouri Synod’s *Theology of Fellowship* says: “With respect to Rom. 16:17, 18 . . . it should be noted that Paul commands the church to mark and avoid makers of divisions and offenses, not their *victims*” (*Four Statements on Fellowship*, p. 40—emphasis in the original).

## 5. Prayers at civic occasions.

How Dr. F. Walther felt about prayer at the meetings of congress and the state legislature finds expression in *Lehre und Wehre* (1878, p. 119). He reported on a prayer spoken by a Rev. Thorpe at the Legislature in Des Moines, Iowa, in which reference was made to political issues. He commented: “We hope that the increasing number of such examples of base misuse of prayer for outbursts of a horrible political fanaticism will have this effect that especially the Christian-minded members will vote for the abolition of this abominable prayer-babbling (*elende Beterei*) from the meetings of Congress and of the state legislatures.” It appears that Dr. Walther viewed such prayers as completely out of place, even aside from the abuses. The abuses only served as occasion for their possible abolition.

Dr. J. Fritz, dean of Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, in his *Pastoral Theology* (copyright 1932) expressed himself very definitely on this subject. He wrote: “And also any religious exercises (prayer, religious address or sermon, religious hymns) in connection with school commencements, so-called baccalaureate services, and the like, or religious exercises of any kind in connection with political meetings, or other meetings of civic bodies, whenever members of different denominations take part, is unionism” (p. 224f.).

Now the Missouri Synod in its *Theology of Fellowship* states: “Public prayer at civic functions is justifiable as the public witness of the church’s intercession for all sorts and conditions of men and of the Christians’ readiness to participate in every work that promotes the weal of mankind” (*Four Statements on Fellowship*, p. 46). Although a warning is expressed against abuses, yet they do not recognize such prayers as unionistic.

We believe that the fathers in the Synodical Conference and particularly also of the Missouri Synod, by words and actions, make the conclusion inescapable that the Missouri Synod in its principles and practices of church fellowship has changed from the historical Scriptural Synodical Conference position. We should also note that there are influential voices within the Missouri Synod expressing themselves, in print and otherwise, in the interest of such changes and even more consequential ones, at the same time even advocating a program and methods whereby such changes can be effected.

These voices find expression, for example, in the *American Lutheran*, an influential, unofficial periodical within the Missouri Synod. Although the Missouri Synod in 1956 declined to join the Lutheran World Federation, a unionistic organization bringing together all shades of Lutherans from throughout the world, the *American Lutheran* very strongly advocates such membership.

Its views on prayer fellowship become apparent from an unsigned editorial that appeared in December 1958. In it we read: “We are still wondering why some among us continue to insist that a Christian commits a sin against God if he unites in prayer with another Christian or a group of Christians with whom he is not in complete doctrinal agreement—more specifically, that members of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod would be acting in violation of a divine commandment if they were to pray with representatives of National

Lutheran Council churches even though the meeting which brought the two groups together had been called for the sole purpose of achieving doctrinal unity on the basis of the Holy Scriptures” (p. 4).

This same editorial then proceeds to condemn the position the Synodical Conference took in regard to joint prayer at the intersynodical conferences in the early 1900’s, to which we also have referred a number of times. We read: “The writer’s first encounter with this *strange principle of Christian fellowship* occurred in 1906, when he observed it in action at the intersynodical conference at Ft. Wayne” (p. 4—emphasis ours). The remainder of the full-page editorial expresses sharp criticism of the “strange principle” that was applied at these meetings.

Dr. O. A. Geisemann, one of the editorial associates of the *American Lutheran* and author of the column “While It Is Day,” gave expression to such a critical attitude toward the conservative Lutheran position of our fathers when he wrote: “As I see it,... we dare no longer allow fear or an inferiority complex or the safety of isolation, or belabored and unjustifiable interpretations of inapplicable Bible texts to prevent us from moving forward aggressively” (April 1956, p. 5).

Only recently Dr. Martin Marty, a pastor of the Missouri Synod and an associate editor of the *Christian Century*, outlined with considerable frankness the program and methods whereby changes may be effected within church bodies that still are antiecumenical (to him this means, church bodies who decline to engage in joint worship and church work unless first confessional unity has been established). Writing in *The Christian Century*, he advocates a program whereby the ecumenically minded remain within their church bodies, but “work for constructive subversion, encirclement, and infiltration, until antiecumenical forces bow to the evangelical weight of reunion.” Although they remain within their denominations, with whose principles they do not agree, they will “somehow telegraph to the world who it is they serve and where their loyalties already lie” (Jan. 11, 1961, p. 45). These are the methods Dr. Marty openly proposes. (See the editorial “For Truth and Ethics” in *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Feb. 26, 1961, p. 67).

## VI. Before the Founding of the Synodical Conference

We have shown what the position of the Synodical Conference on church fellowship has been throughout its history. The question may now be raised: Was the Synodical Conference the first group of Christians to recognize these principles of fellowship from the Word of God? What about previous history? What about Luther?

### Luther

When we mention Luther, we quite naturally think of the Marburg Colloquy of 1529. This was a meeting between Luther and Zwingli, which was arranged in an attempt to unite the reformers of Germany with those of Switzerland, who differed particularly in regard to the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. What position did Luther take in regard to church fellowship with Zwingli? In his book, *This is My Body*, Dr. H. Sasse brings a detailed account of this colloquy and also enters in upon the subject of the fellowship practiced between the participants at Marburg. He draws attention to something that must be remembered about the historical situation at the time. “We must keep in mind that at that time there was no ‘Lutheran’ or ‘Reformed Church’ in the later sense of these designations. All participants were ‘Catholic’ Christians who wanted the Catholic Church reformed, even if they differed as to the way of such reformation. Consequently the modern problem of altar, pulpit, and church fellowship among Churches did not yet exist” (p. 218). While Luther had been excommunicated and had severed his ties with Rome, it is true that the confessional lines in 1529 were not yet conclusively drawn.

Services were conducted at Marburg, at one of which Luther preached, two others at which Luther heard Zwingli and Bucer preach, although, according to Dr. Sasse, “it can be said that there was no common celebration of the sacrament” (p. 218f.). From an incident that occurred in connection with the speaking of the Lord’s Prayer, this conclusion is drawn by Dr. Sasse: “This little incident shows that at least on that occasion Luther could pray together with, or at least in the presence of, people with whom he was negotiating, before he had to deny them the name of Christian brothers” (p. 219).

But what did Luther do after he had to deny them the name of Christian brothers? Dr. Sasse quotes two statements of Luther after the colloquy which can shed some light on this question. To Nicholas Gerbel in Strassburg he wrote on the last day of the colloquy: “As we have forcefully defended our position and the other side has yielded much of theirs and remained stubborn in the one article on the Sacrament of the Altar only, they were dismissed in peace.... Charity and peace we owe even to our enemies. They were told, to be sure, that in case they should fail to come to their senses concerning this article they might enjoy our charity, but could not be regarded by us as brethren and members of Christ” (p. 273f.). When, upon his return to Wittenberg he preached a sermon on Deuteronomy 6, he digressed with this report on the colloquy: “Things look rather hopeful. I do not say that we have attained brotherly unity, but a kindly and friendly concord, so that they seek from us in a friendly way what they are lacking, and we, on the other hand, assist them. If you will pray diligently, the concord may become a brotherly one” (p. 274). When Luther said that things looked rather hopeful, he no doubt was thinking of the fact that the Zwinglians had subscribed to the first fourteen of the Marburg Articles. That surely must have appeared as a great measure of agreement. This, however, did not blind Luther to the error to which Zwingli and his followers still clung with persistence. Their clinging to that error made it impossible to regard them as brethren and members of Christ. Note then the contrast that is made by Luther. Even to enemies you owe *charity* and *peace*. But *Christian fellowship* could not be accorded. Does not that indicate that he viewed Christian fellowship as one thing and charitable civility as another which we owe even to our enemies? And wasn’t for him persistent adherence to error the thing that made Christian fellowship in all its aspects impossible, yes, even when there appeared to be a great measure of agreement? The circumstances in the Church as they existed in Luther’s day were quite unusual and in many ways different from those the Church normally must face. Nevertheless, it is evident that the principles which guided him were the same as those for which the Synodical Conference has stood since its beginning.

### **1645, Thorn, Poland**

It is of interest to note how, about a century later, the Lutherans of Poland under the leadership of Calov and Huelsemann, well-known orthodox theologians who are still being quoted in conservative Lutheran circles today, acted in the matter of joint prayer. Present also was Calixt, who opposed Calov and Huelsemann and who, according to Dr. Adolph Hoenecke, was characterized by unionism, synergism, and a pietistic disrespect for the symbols and for Scripture itself (cf. *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik*, I, p. 7).

The king of Poland had convened a colloquy at Thorn in 1645, aimed at bringing together into peaceful harmony the factions in the Christian Church. Present were 28 Roman Catholics, 28 Lutherans, and 24 Reformed.

Each group first conducted a worship service by itself, after which they assembled for the meeting. At the beginning of the first session, the question of having opening and closing prayers at the meetings arose. The Roman Catholics and the Reformed favored opening with a prayer that was suggested by the Roman Catholic bishop. Although Huelsemann found no fault with the content of the prayer suggested, the Lutherans declined to practice prayer fellowship with the Roman Catholics and the Reformed. In an adjoining room Huelsemann led the Lutherans in prayer, after which they entered the meeting. It would appear that these fathers knew of no joint prayer that could be practiced simply on the basis of the evaluation of the situation, purpose, character, and probable effect of the prayer. We might add that the Missouri Synod *Lutheraner* commented favorably upon this action of the Lutherans of Poland as follows: “From this we can see 1. that we are following the same practice as the faithful Lutherans of Poland in the year 1645; 2. that this demand for public prayer with errorists and heretics is a characteristic of the Reformed, but is foreign to the true Lutheran Church” (1908, p. 111).

### **Fellowship in the Early Church**

About church fellowship among Christians of the first centuries Werner Elert, a conservative German theologian, carried on exhaustive research, the results of which he published in a book, 1954, a few months before his death. We quote a few summary statements from chapters 13 and 14.

“There is either complete fellowship, or none at all” (*Asbendmahl und Kirchengemeinschaft in der Alten Kirche*, p. 136).

“According to the report of Epiphanius the schism between Bishop Meletius of Lycopolis and Peter of Alexandria came to a head in this that ‘the one party and the other prayed separately, and likewise each performed the other holy ministrations for himself,’ that is, by suspending prayer and sacrament fellowship” (p. 138).

Speaking of the custom in Germany that in certain cases Lutheran laymen may commune as visitors at altars of dissenting churches (vice versa), while it is not permitted to Lutheran pastors to officiate at such altars (vice versa), Elert says: “If in modern interconfessional relations distinctions and degrees of church fellowship are made... this can in no wise be traced to the customs of the Early Church” (p. 135).

“Church fellowship is as indivisible as the Church itself, this was recognized by all alike” (p. 142).

### Conclusion

In this presentation, by letting the fathers themselves speak, we have shown what the traditional position of the Synodical Conference in the matter of church fellowship was. We have seen how our fathers applied these principles also particularly in the area of joint prayer, which is one of the vexing problems disturbing the Synodical Conference today. We believe that we must uphold the principles our fathers confessed and applied. We believe this, not simply because it is a position that has come down to us through the years and is sanctified in a manner by tradition. We want no tradition just for the sake of tradition. But we are convinced that these principles are those taught in the Scriptures. We want to cling to the clear Scripture truth to which our Synod was led out of an early unionistic beginning, especially through the spiritual leadership of Dr. Adolph Hoenecke, for many years professor and director at our Seminary, a man who more than any other gave definition to our doctrinal position. We close with a quotation from his well-known *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik*, where he gives expression to the Scriptural position on prayer fellowship.

“Opposed to the Scriptural doctrine of prayer are all those who practice prayer fellowship with errorists.... To refrain completely from all prayer fellowship and fellowship in worship with those who are of a different faith, this alone accords with the Word of God. For, on the one hand, according to Matthew 10:32, 33 we are to confess Christ, and this confession includes everything that Scripture teaches about Him, His person, His office, His work. Besides, according to Luke 9:26 and Mark 8:38 we are not to be ashamed of Him and of His Words. The practice of prayer fellowship and fellowship in worship with errorists is in violation of this duty. Furthermore, according to I Thessalonians 5:22 we are ‘to abstain from all appearance of evil’ (literally: every form of evil), thus also from the evil appearance that in opposition to II Corinthians 6:14 we consider fellowship between light and darkness, between truth and error as proper. Surely such a false impression, to say the least, is given by whoever practices fellowship in worship with those of another faith.

“Those who defend a false union assert that while practicing unionistic fellowship one can still cling firmly to the true confession, that unionism is not then synonymous with indifferentism. This is an illusion, even as experience has sufficiently shown that a false union opens the doors wide to indifferentism. And how could it be otherwise? All unionism is based on the assumption that the truth of Scripture will not be urged in earnest, especially not in so far as it condemns all errors, even the smallest, and warns against them as poison to the soul. For as soon as this would be done, such a union would collapse” (A. Hoenecke, *Dogmatik III*, p. 441f.).