

The *Common Confession*, The Document that Divided:
An Examination of the WELS Response to the *Common
Confession* During the Years 1951-1956

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Confessions have served the Lutheran church faithfully since the beginning of the Reformation. Our Lutheran pastors have seen the importance of confessing our beliefs and teachings, and they continue to subscribe to the whole Book of Concord. By confessing our agreement with the confessions of the church we continue to show the importance of written explanations of what we believe and teach. In a country where the majority of the Christian churches downplay the importance of written confessions of faith our position is becoming a unique one.

The *Common Confession* of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church played a significant role in our synod's history. Unlike the historical confessions of the church contained in the Book of Concord the *Common Confession* had a negative effect on our fellowship with our sister synods in the Synodical Conference. Our confessions often unite us as we confess together the agreement we have in doctrine. The *Common Confession* had been written with the same noble goal in mind of uniting two Lutheran synods in doctrine. The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church hailed this document as the solution to their years of doctrinal disagreement. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, and many within the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod recognized the *Common Confession* as a document that refused to deal with the core problems that separated the two Lutheran synods. The goal of the *Common Confession* was never realized. Instead of uniting Lutherans the *Common Confession* became a document that divided confessing Lutherans who had enjoyed over 80 years of Christian fellowship.

This paper will not attempt to address all of the material that has been written about the *Common Confession*. I will focus primarily on the Wisconsin Synod's response to the *Common Confession* during the years of 1951 through 1956. I will show how this document strained the relations between the Wisconsin Synod and the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. Our eventual break in fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1961 had not been based on the *Common Confession* alone. Students of our history can identify a number of factors that ^{led} lead to our break in fellowship. The *Common Confession* did, however, open our eyes to see how far apart in doctrine we stood with the Missouri Synod. As will be shown, the *Common Confession* was truly the document that divided.

The Years Before the *Common Confession*

Our synod addressed the *Common Confession* in their ^{its} 1951 convention. Before the 1951 convention our synod and its members had seen the importance of defining our doctrinal position. Prof. Reim prepared a booklet called *Where Do We Stand?*. He prepared this booklet in the hope that it would solidify our doctrine and practice. In the forward Prof. Reim wrote, "The publication of this booklet is called for by the fact that the problems with which it deals are becoming more and more pressing, in fact, seem to be coming to a head, so that the year 1950 may well become a year of decision."¹ Our final decision to break fellowship didn't happen until eleven years after 1950. So why publish a booklet at this time period. Prof. Reim felt that now was the time to set our doctrinal foundation securely on the Word of God.

¹ Reim, Edmund C. *Where Do We Stand? An Outline of the Wisconsin Position*. Published by authority of the Committee on Tracts of the Wisconsin Synod. Northwestern Publishing House: Milwaukee, 1950. Pg. 4

It is always in order that a church body carefully review its position lest, in a period of complacency and self-satisfaction, it lose its bearings and drift into a course that will lead it away from the Word.

In this spirit this little booklet is sent forth, with the earnest prayer that it may strengthen our members in the conviction that our Wisconsin position is indeed founded upon the rock of the Word of God.²

To God's glory, during a time of controversy and confusion the Lord led the leaders of our synod back to the scriptures to grow in our understanding of the fellowship principles. Without returning to the scriptures we could have been blown by the winds of unionism that blew during the 1950's.

Prof. Reim with his booklet also prepared the WELS for the battle ahead. In the up coming years we would have to speak up against the decisions, writings, and practices of our big sister, the Missouri Synod. Taking a stand on the purity of scripture would not be a popular position in the upcoming years. We had stood for the truth of scripture in the past, and by the grace of God we would stand for the truth of scripture in the future.

Our synod has in recent years taken a very definite stand in the matter of church union, but in its general policy on the larger question, and also on a number of specific issues, as for instance the proposed Agreement looking toward a union between the American Lutheran Church and our sister synod of Missouri.³

One must remember that the WELS objections to the merger of the Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church began long before the *Common Confession* had been adopted. Prof. Reim points to a couple of instances when we publicly voiced our objection. While speaking of our refusal to sanction the St. Louis Agreement of 1938, he wrote, "At that time our criticism was directed mainly at the fact that this *Declaration* did not adequately settle the old controversies. Others began

² Ibid.

to object because it implied that something less than *complete* doctrinal agreement was required for union.”⁴

Later the WELS found it necessary to voice our objections again.

We found it necessary to restate our objections from time to time, the last occasion being in 1947, when the American Lutheran Church, having declared that the attempt to achieve doctrinal agreement had failed, issued its *Friendly Invitation*. In this document the A. L. C. Commissioners said in so many words that full agreement was not necessary, that the remaining differences lie in “areas where there exists an allowable and wholesome latitude of theological opinion on the basis of the teachings of the Word of God.”⁵

The *Common Confession* fell within a framework of historical events. This one document had not begun the break in relations, nor would this document bring about the final end in our relations with the Missouri Synod. The WELS had taken a stand on the fellowship issues of the day. The WELS had identified the problems with the proposed merger of the LCMS and ALC. When the *Common Confession* came to the attention of the Synodical Conference claiming to have solved all of the doctrinal differences between these two synods, it provided another opportunity for the WELS to clearly state the truth of scripture. Through our conventions, papers, reports, and resolutions the Wisconsin Synod sounded a clear warning to our brothers and sisters in the Missouri Synod. We stated that the *Common Confession* was not a solution to the doctrinal differences, but rather a glossing over the differences that separated the two synods.

1951

Our convention of 1951 in New Ulm proved to be the main examination of the *Common Confession*. The conventions from 1951 to 1956 had spent a considerable amount of time examining and dissecting the *Common Confession*. At the 1951

³ Ibid., Pg. 6

⁴ Ibid., Pg. 16

convention the main topic of discussion was the *Common Confession* and our examination of the document.

Eighteen sessions were held, five more than during the 30th convention, and an additional day was required to finish the work.

Instead of the customary single essay, six brief essays were read to aid the convention in its study of the Common Confession. The essayists and their topics were as follows: Prof. Roland Hoenecke on Means of Grace and The Lutheran Confessions; Prof. Armin Schuetze on Election; Pastor T Adascheck on Conversion; Pastor E. Wendland, Jr., on Justification and Redemption; Pastor O Siegler on The Last Things; Prof. E. E. Kowalke on Church and Ministry.

An equivalent of eight full sessions was devoted to the hearing of the essays and the floor committee report on Church Union, dealing with the serious and difficult problems of intersynodical relations of our day.⁶

The six essays focused on the chief areas of disagreement between the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod. These same areas would be closely examined in the *Common Confession* to determine if the document had dealt fully with the areas of doctrinal disagreement. Already in 1951 we can see our synodical leaders devoting large amounts of time to the fellowship controversy and the related issues. They took the time to carefully examine the issues and formulate resolutions that showed a desire to preserve the confessional fellowship of the Synodical Conference. In 1951 the task of greatest importance was the study of the *Common Confession*. President Brenner wrote in his *President's Report*, "Our most important task at this convention is to study the *Common Confession*, adopted by The Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod and by The American Lutheran Church, which has been submitted to us for our approval."⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Proceedings: Thirty-first Convention, Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States*. Held at Dr. Martin Luther College New Ulm, Minnesota August 8-15, 1951. Pg. 3

⁷ Ibid., Pg. 16

In convention the Missouri Synod made the *Common Confession* a doctrinal statement of agreement with the American Lutheran Church in Resolution No. 14.

Resolved, That we rejoice and thank God that the "Common Confession" shows that agreement has been achieved in the doctrines treated by the two committees; and be it further

Resolved, That we accept the Common Confession as a statement of these doctrines in harmony with Scriptures; and be it further

Resolved, That if the American Lutheran Church, in convention assembled, accepts it, the "Common Confession" shall be recognized as a statement of agreement on these doctrines between us and the American Lutheran Church.⁸

Even though the Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod and American Lutheran Church recognized the *Common Confession* as a confession that settled their doctrinal differences, they had not declared fellowship with one another. Resolution 17 stated that steps remained to be accomplished.

Whereas, Several steps remain to be taken before church fellowship can be established between us and the American Lutheran Church, as outlined in the foregoing resolutions; therefore be it

Resolved, That when by the grace of God everything necessary for fellowship has been accomplished, this fact is to be announced officially by the President of Synod. Until then no action is to be taken by any member of Synod which would overlook the fact that we are not as yet united.⁹

In order to understand the resolutions that the WELS and Synodical Conference passed, a review of the individual articles of the *Common Confession* may prove helpful. Prof. Reim in his booklet, *Where Do We Stand?*, gives an evaluation of the *Common Confession* in two chapters. He points out an interesting tidbit of information about the publicity that surrounded the writing of the *Common Confession*.

As clippings drift in from various parts of the country and one notes the points at which they are alike, sometimes even to the very words, it becomes increasingly clear that we are witnessing the workings of a well planned and well managed publicity campaign, directed by a group of men who have made up

⁸ Ibid., Pg. 117

⁹ Ibid., Pg. 119

their minds as to what they want and are determined to get it. And so great is the power of publicity that in spite of the fact that the whole matter must first be submitted to the vote of the coming conventions, this Lutheran merger *may* well be just around the corner.¹⁰

Apparently, the publicity campaign had been so strong that Prof. Reim even felt that a merger may occur in the near future. However, after questioning the Missouri representatives who had come to answer questions about the *Common Confession* for the WELS representatives, they expressed their displeasure with the false publicity. "At the same time we can state that these representatives deplore the newspaper publicity which this report has received, especially the anticipation of a speedy union which was thereby created."¹¹

Prof. Reim in his evaluation of the *Common Confession* distilled his study to answering three basic questions about the document. These three questions strike at the heart of the issues that the *Common Confession* was meant and was claimed to have solved.

1. Does this new document measure up to the high standards of the "Brief Statement," or does it indicate a recession from that former level?
2. Has the new document solved the difficulties concerning existing doctrinal differences, or has it merely avoided them?
3. Has the issue been faced that is raised by the oft expressed view of the ALC, namely that full doctrinal agreement is not necessary for church fellowship?¹²

All the Lutheran synods in the Synodical Conference had agreed that *the Brief Statement* accurately expressed the truth of scripture. If the *Common Confession* would mean anything in the settling of doctrinal differences it needed to meet the high standards the *Brief Statement* had set. The second question addresses the immediate

¹⁰ Reim. Pg. 38

¹¹ Ibid., Pg. 42

¹² Ibid., Pg. 43

situation that faced the Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod and the Synodical Conference. Had the *Common Confession* truly solved the doctrinal differences between the American Lutheran Church and the members of the Synodical Conference? The final question addresses probably the greatest offense to the truth of God's Word that the ALC had committed. They felt that church bodies didn't have to agree on all the doctrines of scripture. They could agree ^{on} a few key doctrines and allow the doctrinal differences to remain in the other areas.

Prof. Reim examined the *Common Confession* and found that it failed each of the three key questions he used in his scrutiny of the document. He showed how the wording of the *Common Confession* lacked strong statements against the error of the ALC regarding their principles of church fellowship.

We are sure that our Missouri brethren on that committee would like to have said "combat *all* error, ... dare not condone *any* error," etc. But as it is, the issue has not been met, in spite of the challenge of the official ALC pronouncements. The matter stands exactly where it stood before – except for one point. Until recently Missouri defined church fellowship as altar, pulpit, and prayer fellowship. That this specific mention of prayer fellowship has now fallen by the wayside is, of course, a major concession to the ALC.¹³

Prof. Reim also showed the faults of the *Common Confession* in addressing the issues that raged at the heart of the doctrinal differences between the synods. He says that he didn't find false doctrine in the statements on Election and Scripture, but he is disappointed in the lack of strong clear statements on both of these issues. Reim points to the *Brief Statement* as a clearer and more strongly worded confession on both of these disputed points. Under Justification he notes the lack of using the word "declared." Since this is a central idea of justification he feels it is a great loss to not have it in the confession. Even though the final statement on the Last Times is

considered the best part of the confession, Reim reveals its weakness concerning the Antichrist.¹⁴ His strongest remarks concern the article on conversion.

Article VII deals with the doctrine of Conversion. It disposes of the subject in six lines. One would hardly guess that next to Election this was the outstanding issue in the former controversies. The Brief Statement requires ninety lines to do justice to the same subject. The entire statement is disappointingly thin.

The question whether, as once claimed in ALC circles, unregenerate man is capable of adopting a nonresistant or neutral attitude is not touched on. And Rom. 8:7 ("The carnal mind is enmity against God"), quoted by the Brief Statement together with Gen. 6:5 and 8:1 to show that all men since the Fall are inclined only to evil, is not even mentioned as a proof passage.

This tragic omission of a point which, while decidedly unpopular in our day, is still so highly necessary in the teaching of the Church, is perhaps the most deplorable instance of the weakness of the new document.¹⁵

Clearly the *Common Confession* failed to address the issues that had divided the Lutheran synods. Instead of facing the doctrinal differences head on and resolving them with clear statements, the framers of the confession decided to write in such a way that both sides could interpret the document correctly. They failed to deal with the tough issues that faced them and wrote a confession that only highlighted teachings. As far as answering the first question Prof. Reim posed concerning the *Common Confession* he writes:

More might be said. But this should suffice to support our finding, namely that upon careful scrutiny and close examination this document, designed for the tremendously important function of bridging the doctrinal gap between the two great Lutheran church bodies, has been found sadly wanting. The high level of the Brief Statement has not been maintained.¹⁶

Prof. Reim's evaluation was not the only evaluation of the *Common Confession*. One more evaluation is worth noting. As noted earlier the 1951 convention essays

¹³ Ibid., Pg. 44

¹⁴ Ibid., Pg. 44-47

¹⁵ Ibid., Pg. 46-47

¹⁶ Ibid., Pg. 47

focused on the main points of disagreement between the members of the Synodical Conference and the American Lutheran Church. In their review of the *Common Confession* the Standing Committee on Church Union zeroed in on those key areas of disagreement.

Among the doctrines that have been in controversy between the Synodical Conference and the synods now composing the ALC there are especially three in which the place that is assigned to faith plays a peculiarly important part. These are the doctrines of Justification, Conversion, and Election. In each case the *sola gratia* of the Reformation is at stake.¹⁷

The Standing Committee on Church Union evaluated each of the articles of the *Common Confession*, and they sited omissions, confusing wording, and wording that actually helped to promote some of the false teachings of the American Lutheran Church. I will focus primarily on their comments concerning the three doctrines of Justification, Conversion, and Election.

The Standing Committee on Church Union noted the lack of a clear explanation of objective justification. They also pointed to wording that could be seen as supporting a false idea that man can cooperate in his justification.

Any clear and correct presentation of this article requires not merely the inclusion of the term "objective justification," but a clear statement that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God has already declared every sinner righteous in His sight.

This truth is impaired when the article states that forgiveness "has been secured and provided for all men." For this still leaves room for the thought that the justification of the sinner is not complete until the missing factor of personal (subjective) faith is supplied, a thought which is even suggested in the Article by its description of justification as taking place on the basis of "Christ's righteousness, which He imputes to the sinner though the Gospel and which the sinner accepts by faith.

Since this formulation admits of false answers to the question concerning the function of faith in justification, the article must be rejected.¹⁸

¹⁷ Proceedings 1951. Pg. 128

¹⁸ Ibid., Pg. 129

Their review of the article on conversion highlights omissions. Without these statements the doctrine of conversion is not presented clearly in order to reject certain false doctrines.

In view of past controversies on this subject a clear and correct presentation of the doctrine of Conversion must include a rejection of the untenable distinction between a natural and a willful resistance of man, as well as of any other attempt at explaining the mystery "cur alii prae aliis? (Cf. Brief Statement, Art. 12-14)

We note that the Common Confession not only fails to include such a specific rejection, but that its positive wording does not exclude the thought of man's preparing himself for conversion by his refraining from such willful resistance.

We also note the lack of any definite reference to the total spiritual disability of natural man as described in the classic passages (Eph. 2:1-3; Ro. 8:7; 1 Cor. 2:14), or of a clear statement on this subject (cf. Brief Statement, Art. 11). In view of the other deficiency mentioned above this is a particularly unfortunate omission.

Since the article thus leaves room for the error that man's conversion is at least in part conditioned upon his ^{own} attitude or preparation, and since this is precisely the issue that was in controversy between the synods of the American Lutheran Church and the Synodical Conference, it must, as a confession, be rejected. The purely receptive function of faith has not been maintained.¹⁹

The Standing Committee on Church Union felt that three specific points needed to be covered under the article on Election, and they found that the *Common Confession* had failed to address all three points. This left the *Common Confession* as an acceptable document for those who believe the synergistic error.

- a. a clear and unmistakable statement that this election is an election *unto* faith (Act. 13:48; Eph. 1:5; 2 Th. 2:13);
- b. the positive assurance that this election is a *cause* of our salvation and what pertains thereto (Trgl. 1065, #8; Ro. 8:28-30; Jn. 10:27-29; cf. Jn 6:65);
- c. definite recognition of the certainty of this election ("which cannot fail or be overthrown," – Trgl. 1079, # 45. Cf. Also Mt. 24:24; Jn. 10;27-29; Ro. 8:28-30, 38f.).

These vital and indispensable statements are, however, not to be found in this article of the Common Confession. This article must therefore be rejected because it fails to say what is required in the Scriptural presentation of the doctrine of Election. Acts 20:27; Deut. 4:2.

¹⁹ Ibid., Pg. 129-130

The article also falls short of confessional clarity by failing to state that God's eternal decree of election did not merely set up a description of those who will be saved, but means that He has chosen "each and every person," a specific number, unto faith and eternal life.

Since the Common Confession in this article of predestination – by which doctrine the Scriptures take the matter of our faith and salvation entirely out of our hands and place it completely into the hands of our loving God and Father – neglected to assign clearly and unmistakably to faith its place in God's act of election, this confession thereby failed in the supreme test concerning the *sola gratia*, and has opened the gates wide for the synergistic error.²⁰

The *Common Confession* failed to resolve the doctrinal differences. As can be seen from the review of the *Common Confession* by the Standing Committee on Church Union this confession had to be rejected as a document upon which the Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church could enter into fellowship with one another. The main problem with the *Common Confession* did not come from stated false doctrines contained in the document. Instead the main source of criticism are the key omissions concerning the doctrinal issues that separated the two Lutheran church bodies. The *Common Confession* failed to address the historic errors of the American Lutheran Church, and then give a clear and complete statement against those errors.

The final judgment of the Standing Committee on Church Union against the *Common Confession* found the document to be a denial of the truth because it failed to settle the doctrinal differences in dispute.

The subsequent years have witnessed a progressive deterioration of this situation. Particularly in its relation to the National Lutheran Council the American Lutheran Church has been involved in a constant practice of unionism, and is still so involved. For many years this church has been, and still is, carrying on simultaneous negotiations in several directions which are quite opposite to each other. At the same time we have been compelled to note an increasing number of cases of unionism among the members of our sister synod.

²⁰ Ibid., Pg. 130-131

The "Statement of the Forty-four" has given formal expression to this disturbing trend.

Consequently the present document must, if anything, be stronger than Missouri's union resolutions of 1938, both in its positive statement of doctrine and also in the specific rejection of error, particularly since it is offered as the settlement of the controversies over which the respective church bodies have been divided in the past.

We regret that we fail to find these qualities in the Document submitted to us. Our specific criticism is set forth in our committee's "Review of the Common Confession," which has been presented to our conferences and districts for their study.

These matters have also been discussed with the Committee on Doctrinal Unity, the authorized representatives of the Missouri Synod. Meetings were held in Chicago January 15-16 and April 9-10, the discussion being based largely on our "Review." While the Missouri Committee took careful note of our objections, these discussions have to date brought nothing to light which would cause us to reverse our evaluation of the Common Confession.

After careful consideration and mutual discussion we find ourselves constrained to report that in our judgment this Agreement involves an actual denial of the truth, since it claims to be a settlement of doctrinal differences which are not settled in fact.²¹

The historical context in which the *Common Confession* had been written demanded a strong statement against the errors of unionism and other specific doctrinal errors within the American Lutheran Church. Since the *Common Confession* had not taken a strong stand for the truth of God's Word the Missouri synod's next action had to consider either a completely new confession, agreement based on the *accepted Brief Statement* or a substantial revision of the *Common Confession* that addressed all of the concerns of the WELS Standing Committee on Church Union.

The Floor Committee on Church Union received the report of the Standing Committee on Church Union favorably. They decided to once again emphasize in their report their motivation for the WELS review and criticism of the *Common Confession*.

We consider it to be no mere repetition, but a necessary emphasis to state here to you our motivation for our action on the Common Confession. It is a

²¹ Ibid., Pg. 143-144

loving concern for the heart of the Gospel, the *Sola Gratia* (By Grace Alone), as already set forth in the preamble to the Review of the Common Confession.²²

Our actions on the *Common Confession* came out of our love for the Gospel. The resolutions against the *Common Confession* also came out of our love for the preservation of the Gospel. To lose the church's treasure of the Gospel would leave the Lutheran church without a message to preach to the lost souls of this world. Letting their love for the Gospel predominate in their decision our synodical leaders proposed the following action by resolution.

2. That we inform the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod that we not only find the Common Confession to be inadequate in the points noted (cf. Review of the Common Confession), but that we also hold that the adoption of the Common Confession by the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod involves an untruth and creates a basically untruthful situation since this action has been officially interpreted as a settlement of past differences which are in fact not settled.”

3. That we ask the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod to repudiate its stand that the Common Confession is a settlement of the doctrines treated by the two committees (Mo. – ALC).

4. a. That we direct the attention of our sister Synod of Missouri to the position which the American Lutheran Church has taken in the Friendly Invitation of March 4, 1947, with the remark contending for “an area where there exists an allowable and wholesome latitude of theological opinion on the basis of the teaching of the Word of God,” and that we indicate to the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod that this position of the American Lutheran Church challenges the clarity and therefore the authority of the Scriptures. (Ps. 119:105.) This can only cause confusion and disturbance in the church. Therefore negotiations should be suspended.

4. b. That we further indicate to the sister Synod of Missouri that not until the American Lutheran Church recognizes this as the basic problem which must first be considered and settled, will the obstacle to the renewal of doctrinal discussions have been removed. (Cf. Convention Proceedings of the Joint Synod, 1939, page. 61, 2b and c.)²³

The Floor Committee on Church Union decided to make use of the Synodical Conference for the expressed purpose of settling the issues surrounding the *Common*

²² Ibid., Pg. 146-147

²³ Ibid., Pg. 147-148

Confession. The Synodical Conference had been established for this purpose to decide doctrinal matters between its members.

1. That we further inform the President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod through our President that, if the appropriate actions in the matter treated in this report is not forthcoming, at least through the Presidium of that body, we shall feel constrained to carry the issue to the Synodical Conference at its next regular convention.²⁴

The Standing Committee on Church Union and the Floor Committee on Church Union did not act as lone voices against the *Common Confession*. The action of the Synodical Convention showed that the synod as a whole believed that the *Common Confession* compromised the truth of God's Word. The report of the Floor Committee was adopted unanimously.

After a complete and exhaustive study of the floor committee report, on which the Convention spent the greater part of 8 complete sessions, and after inducing many minor changes and additions to the report, the Convention *unanimously* adopted the various points of the report and finally the report in its entirety.²⁵

1952

Now the Synodical Conference would have to face the stir created by the LCMS adopting the *Common Confession* as a statement of agreement between themselves and the ALC. The Synodical Conference met for their forty-second convention in 1952 with the *Common Confession* as one of the main points of debate.

The WELS Standing Committee on Church Union had proposed a memorial for this convention to address the *Common Confession*. They called upon the Synodical Conference to request the Missouri Synod to repeal the *Common Confession* and conform its practices to the Brief Statement.

²⁴ Ibid., Pg. 148

²⁵ Ibid., Pg. 148-149

We therefore submit that by the adoption of the *Common Confession* the Missouri Synod has compromised the Scriptural and historical doctrinal position of the Synodical Conference for the reasons thus indicated in the resolutions of the 1951 convention of the Wisconsin Synod

We therefore urge the Synodical Conference in convention assembled to request the Missouri Synod to repeal the *Common Confession* and to return to the clarity and decisiveness in setting fourth the Scriptural and historical doctrinal position of the Synodical Conference for which the *Brief Statement* sets an excellent precedent.

We therefore request that Synodical Conference in convention assembled to appeal to the Missouri Synod to conform to the position in regard to practice as it is set forth in the *Brief Statement* and in the 1950 resolutions of the Synodical Conference.²⁶

The issue had been clearly presented to the floor of the Synodical Conference. Now the representatives had to face a difficult decision. How would they react to the resolutions of the Wisconsin Synod? How would they view the *Common Confession* that the WELS had already identified as a document that divided? What would be their action towards the largest member of the Synodical Conference, the LCMS? We can be sure that there was not a lack of debate concerning the *Common Confession*. A review of the confession lasted almost the entire Thursday evening session of the conference. A motion was made and seconded that identified the *Common Confession* as being an inadequate statement of agreement between the Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church. The motion clearly stated not only the inadequacy of the *Common Confession*, but also that the document sacrificed the Scriptural and historical doctrinal position of the Synodical Conference.²⁷

Some of the representatives at the Synodical Conference convention saw the dangers of the LCMS holding to the *Common Confession* as a statement of agreement. However, the final action of the Synodical Conference left the issue unresolved.

²⁶ *Proceedings of the Forty-Second Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference*, 1952. Pg. 157-158

Representatives from the Missouri Synod noted that a Part II of the *Common Confession* was being prepared that would address these issues, but the document was not complete at this time. So instead of acting on the basis of the *Common Confession* before them, the convention decided to wait until they could see Part II.

WHEREAS, The Committee on Doctrinal Unity of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, as provided for by the Missouri Synod Convention *Proceedings*, page 585, has prepared a tentative Part II of the *Common Confession* to meet the objections raised against the *Common Confession*; therefore be it

Resolved, That the Synodical Conference postpone all further action with reference to the *Common Confession* until said Part II has been completed and presented to the constituent Synods of the Synodical Conference and the American Lutheran Church.²⁸

This resolution did not pass unanimously. The final vote stood at 154 in favor and 62 against.²⁹ With this resolution the Synodical Conference washed their hands of the *Common Confession* until Part II of the confession was published. Now the WELS would gather in convention the following year with nothing being resolved for them by the Synodical Conference convention of 1952.

1953

The actions of the Synodical Conference in 1952 failed to deal with the *Common Confession*. The WELS Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union recognized the failings of the Synodical Conference and issued their protest against the resolution concerning the *Common Confession*.

Since this resolution not only nullified the work of that Floor Committee, but also effectively defeated the very purpose for which the Synodical Conference was founded, namely to be a forum where matters of doctrine and practice could be discussed between the constituent synods, your representatives found themselves constrained to register their solemn protest.³⁰

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Pg. 159

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Pg. 160

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Proceedings Thirty-second Convention Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States*. Held at Northwestern College Watertown, Wisconsin August 5-12, 1953. Pg. 95

The forum, that the WELS had been given to settle doctrinal disputes like the issue of the *Common Confession*, had done nothing to settle the issue. The *Common Confession* was still considered to be a statement of agreement between the LCMS and the ALC. The LCMS was still continuing talks with the ALC with the goal of establishing fellowship with one another.

Besides dealing with our disappointment in the decision of the Synodical Conference convention, the WELS also out of concern for our brothers and sisters in the Missouri Synod wanted them to turn away from unionist actions. Pres. Brenner had written a letter to the Missouri Synod for their convention at Houston, Texas on June 17-27, 1953. He wrote this letter expressing the WELS desire to preserve our fellowship with the Missouri Synod, but, at the same time, being firm in calling for the removal of offenses. Two of those offenses were the *Common Confession* and the ongoing fellowship talks with the ALC.³¹

The Missouri Synod could have brought the debate over the *Common Confession* to an end at their Houston convention by repealing the document. Instead, of repealing the *Common Confession* the Missouri Synod effectively stalled the debate by calling upon the sister synods to study the *Common Confession* with the additional Part II. They also asked the Synodical Conference to delay a decision on the *Common Confession* until the Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod had decided on the document in their 1956 convention.

RESOLVED, That we respectfully request also our sister synods in the Synodical Conference, for purposes of study to treat Part I and Part II of the Common Confession as one document.

³¹ Ibid., Pg. 96-97

RESOLVED, That we respectfully request the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America again to postpone action on the Common Confession until Part II has been acted upon by The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod at its convention in 1956.³²

Our WELS committee found five reasons why it was an unacceptable for the Missouri Synod to hold off any decisions in the Synodical Conference until after 1956. First, the postponement was too long. The WELS couldn't deal with the *Common Confession* for four years and the Synodical Conference for five years. Second, the *Common Confession* would continue to stand ^{as} the statement of agreement for the LCMS and ALC during those years. Third, it didn't make sense for the sister synods to study a document that the Missouri Synod had not even approved themselves. Fourth, Part II failed to meet our objections to the sections on Justification, Conversion, and Election. Finally, the current situation is aggravated by the American Lutheran Church continuing to seek fellowship with other Lutheran bodies, and the allowance of the *Common Confession* to stand as a basis for future fellowship between LCMS and ALC.³³

The Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union stated at the end of their report that they felt the WELS could no longer continue our fellowship with the Missouri Synod. They called upon the Floor Committee to study their report and then to write appropriate recommendations and resolutions.³⁴ The final recommendations of the Floor Committee didn't go as far as the report from the Standing Committee. The floor committee declared that the actions of the LCMS had caused a break in our relations that threatened the continuance of the Synodical Conference and our own affiliation with the Missouri Synod. They approved the *Protest* that the Standing Committee had

³² Ibid., Pg. 100

³³ Ibid., Pg. 101

³⁴ Ibid., Pg. 101-102

written following the Synodical Conference convention in 1952. They asked the Conference of Presidents to educate the congregations in the doctrines and issues of this controversy. Their final recommendation called upon the WELS to prayerfully await any indication that the Missouri Synod would turn from their present stand, but they didn't call for a break in fellowship with the Missouri Synod.³⁵

The debate did not end with the Floor Committee's resolutions. ^{Pastor} Prof. Winfred Schaller proposed a *Substitute Proposal in Matters of Church Union*. In this *Substitute Proposal* he recommended that the WELS break fellowship with the Missouri Synod. Motions were made and seconded for both the Floor Committee's report and the *Substitute Proposal*. In the end, motions prevailed to hold everything off until a recessed convention was held in October 8, 1953.³⁶ At that recessed convention the report of the Floor Committee was adopted, instead of ^{Pastor} Prof. Schaller's *Substitute Proposal*.

1954

The issue had not died. The *Common Confession* once again came up for discussion at the Synodical Conference convention. One of the resolutions of the WELS Floor Committee requested the President of the Synodical Conference to devote the whole convention to the break in relations caused by the actions of the LCMS. The situation had worsened since the last Synodical Conference convention in 1952. The WELS came close to breaking fellowship with the Missouri Synod during their 1953 convention. Relations between the synods of the Synodical Conference had become strained. The members of the Synodical Conference needed to make some efforts

³⁵ Ibid., Pg. 104-105

³⁶ Ibid., Pg. 104-106

towards solving the doctrinal differences. This time they did act against the *Common Confession*, unfortunately they didn't go far enough.

2. WHEREAS, Further fellowship negotiations between the American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod have been suspended because of the merger actions of the American Lutheran Church; and

4. WHEREAS, Not all synods of the Synodical Conference had a part in the negotiations between The Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church, which resulted in the drafting of the *Common Confession*; and

5. WHEREAS, The Wisconsin Synod and the Norwegian Synod and other individuals within the Synodical Conference believe that the *Common Confession* is unacceptable as a settlement of past differences with the American Lutheran Church; therefore be it

6. *Resolved*, That we request The Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod not to use the *Common Confession* as a functioning union document, without, however, passing judgment pro or con on the doctrinal content of the *Common Confession* by this convention;³⁷

The Floor Committee on Doctrinal Matters finally requested the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod to remove the *Common Confession* as a functioning union document. Their request fell short when they decided not to pass judgment on the doctrinal content of the *Common Confession*. Failing to pass judgment on the doctrinal content failed to identify the chief reasons why the document should be repealed in the first place. The reason the LCMS should repeal the *Common Confession* was reduced to the WELS and ELS not accepting the document. The resolutions of the Floor Committee on Doctrinal Matters passed, but a number of people decided to have their negative vote officially recorded. Morton Schroeder's comment explained well the reason for the negative votes.

I wish to have my "No" vote recorded because the words of the Floor Committee report: "without, however, passing judgment pro or con on the

³⁷ *Proceedings of the Forty-Third Convention, Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, Assembled at St. Peter's Church East Detroit, Mich. August 10-13, 1954 & First St. Paul's Church Chicago, ILL. November 16-19, 1954. Pg. 193*

doctrinal content of the Common Confession,” are diametrically opposed to action taken by my synod in plenary convention in 1951 and 1953.³⁸

At this 1954 convention an *Overture Concerning the Common Confession* was presented to those in attendance. The *Overture* listed eleven facts against the use of the *Common Confession* as a statement of agreement between the LCMS and the ALC. In view of the facts the *Overture* called upon the Synodical Conference to reject the *Common Confession* because it does not define and safe guard Scriptural doctrines. The *Overture* also asked the Synodical Conference to request the LCMS to rescind their 1950 resolutions concerning the *Common Confession*. The action taken on the *Overture* included printing it in the *Proceedings of the Forty-Third Convention* and sending it on to the presidents of the synods.³⁹

1955 & 1956

A lot had taken place in the WELS and the Synodical Conference since the last Missouri Synod convention in 1953. The WELS had met twice, once in regular convention and a second time in a recessed convention. During those conventions the proposal had been made in the *Substitute Proposal in Matters of Church Union* to break fellowship with the Missouri Synod. The Synodical Conference finally took action against the *Common Confession*, but failed to deal with the matter decisively. Unfortunately during this whole time the Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod had not met in convention to address the resolutions of the WELS or the Synodical Conference. Because the LCMS had not met members in the WELS felt that we could not take a final vote to break fellowship until we had let Missouri respond to our admonition at their

³⁸ Ibid., Pg. 194

³⁹ Ibid., Pg. 200-202

own synod convention. Both Floor Committee No. 2 and the Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union affirmed their position that the LCMS had brought about a break in our relations through their continued acceptance of the *Common Confession*. The convention approved the recommendation to hold the final vote to break fellowship until the recessed convention in 1956.⁴⁰

When our recessed convention of 1956 was called to order the landscape of the controversy had changed. By their resolutions the Missouri Synod seemed to be taking steps towards solving the doctrinal differences between the synods. Through their resolutions they virtually removed the *Common Confession* from the debate.

Resolution 13, Committee 3:

Subject: THE COMMON CONFESSION

WHEREAS, The Common Confession represents a sincere attempt on the part of Synod to achieve unity of doctrine with the American Lutheran Church; and

WHEREAS, Honest and painstaking scrutiny of both Part I and Part II of the Common Confession has revealed nothing in conflict with the Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions; and

WHEREAS, It appears from recent historical developments that the Common Confession can no longer serve as a functioning union document; therefore be it

RESOLVED, That hereafter the Common Confession (Part I and II) be not regarded or employed as a functioning basic document toward the establishment of altar and pulpit fellowships with other church bodies, and be it further

RESOLVED, That the Common Confession, one document composed of Parts I and II, be recognized as a statement in harmony with the Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.⁴¹

Our Committee's evaluation felt these resolutions, in essence, supplied the action that our Synod had requested in our objections to the LCMS resolutions of 1950

⁴⁰ *Reports and Memorials of the Thirty-Third Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States Held at Michigan Lutheran Seminary Saginaw, Michigan August 10-17, 1955.* Pg. 85-87

⁴¹ *Thirty-Third Convention – Recessed Session, Watertown August 21-23, 1956.* (No page numbers were available on notes from this document. The document has been placed loosely in the bound addition of the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary reserve copy of the Synodical Proceedings.)

concerning the *Common Confession*. However, we did continue our fellowship with the LCMS in protest because of the unsettled issues of Scouting, military chaplaincy, prayer fellowship, and one statement about the *Common Confession*.

WHEREAS, We are not ready to stand committed to the contention "That the Common Confession, one document composed of Parts I and II, be recognized as a statement in harmony with the Sacred Scriptures and the Confessions," inasmuch as the document failed to settle the doctrinal controversies which the Church was assured had been settled by it;⁴²

The Lutheran Church -- Missouri Synod had removed the *Common Confession* from the debate. A statement that they felt had expressed doctrinal agreement with the American Lutheran Church had helped to bring discord and division instead of union and fellowship. During the six years the *Common Confession* functioned as a statement of agreement the American Lutheran Church grew further away from the Missouri Synod instead of closer. The bond of fellowship between the Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Synod had been strained during those same six years. Their strained relationship would not be repaired and would end in 1961.

The WELS response to the *Common Confession* stood firmly on our love for the truth of God's Word. The WELS response also showed our love for brothers and sisters in the faith. Church history holds lessons for all churches. When we are called upon to produce a confession may we always hold to our love for God's Word first and foremost. Then we must seriously evaluate the final confession to determine if it addressed the controversies it was meant to solve or merely ignored them. May the Lord of the Church continue to preserve our love for his Word, our love for others, and the treasure of true doctrine.

⁴² Ibid.

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