

THE SEARCH FOR LUTHERAN UNITY THROUGH THE USE OF FREE CONFERENCES:
exemplified primarily by C.F.W. Walther

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It is a God-pleasing desire for a Christian^o to want to walk together with those who profess the same Lord. That desire has found expression throughout the ages as faithful Christians seek to unite with one another and share the work which God would have us do. Yet all too often outward unity becomes the goal while the unity of faith and doctrine falls by the way-side. Some mistakenly have the notion that God's church is something that can be seen. And so in an effort to gain a visible church, the unity of doctrine that is so essential for true, God-pleasing unity is not sought out. Differences of opinion concerning clear scriptural testimony are allowed to stand alongside, even above, the truth. Such was the case in the middle of the 19th century as American Lutherans struggled to find their identity and earnestly desired to form a united Lutheran church in this country.

The efforts to bring about that unity, however, basically took two different forms. The one I have already alluded to above: outward unity was sought at the expense of doctrinal unity, and the resulting liberalism and false theology were unavoidable. The other effort sought to unify solely on agreement in doctrine--first and foremost, on all the teachings of Scripture, and second, on those confessions with which the church of the past had boldly testified to its faith. The man who led this effort in the American Lutheran church of the 19th century was C.F.W. Walther.

The situation in which Walther found himself was not entirely different from the storms that had faced Lutheranism in the 16th century, nor was it completely different from the winds of change that blow today. The monster that is ecumenism is one of the most appealing temptations to human reason that Satan uses. In spite of Scripture's clear testimony concerning fellowship and unity, men still allow their emotions and desires to take

Scripture captive as they pursue their own goals. The General Synod led the charge toward unionism, as Walther and his colleagues found themselves in what seemed to be a small minority of faithful, confessing Lutherans.

"The immediate cause of the [Lutheran free] conferences was undoubtedly the attempt made within the General Synod to overthrow the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession* by substituting for it an American recension called the *Definite Platform*" (Lueker, 529-530). In 1855, S.S. Schmucker's *Definite Platform* appeared on the scene, virtually denying ^{a number of} the truths of the *Augsburg Confession*, and disavowing the importance of subscribing to it. It also threw out such scriptural basics as real presence and baptismal regeneration. The General Synod showed by its actions that it had no intention of disavowing this document or its contents. The Synod quite simply declared and believed that outward adherence to the *Augsburg Confession* was enough to unite Lutherans in America. Nor did the Synod simply mouth those beliefs, but also put them into practice by admitting liberal-minded church bodies into its family (e.g. Melanchthon and Franckean synods). The General Synod took a least-common-denominator approach when choosing with whom they would ally themselves. Thus disagreement, as is the case with the ecumenical movement in general, was and is viewed as being healthy for the organization. The false teachings are tolerated and even encouraged.

From a human standpoint, the outlook certainly did not appear to be promising for the staunchly conservative Walther and his companions. But just as God ~~showed~~ reassured Elijah that He had reserved for Himself 7,000 who had not bent the knee to Baal, so also God would show that there were faithful pastors and laymen across the country and in various synods who sincerely desired to cling to the truth of God's Word. It took something as

"un-Lutheran" as the *Platform* to mobilize the conservative remnant in American Lutheranism, and for the efforts at achieving unity to be realized. Sadly, the response to the *Definite Platform*, while strong, also proved to be divisive:

Two entirely different solutions were offered in response to the confessional upheaval in the mid-1850's. Both were committed to seeking unity and fellowship among Lutherans. The first comprised a series of "free conferences" which were conducted between 1856-1859. The second would base fellowship and unity on an acceptance of the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession*. The Missouri Synod favored the first approach; the General Council (1867), the second. (Nelson, 229)

In reacting to the proposals and practices of the General Synod, the founding members of the General Council basically made the same mistake. Instead of insisting on total agreement in doctrine before organizing, the General Council decided to band together first (1867), and discuss differences later. Eventually, as we know, the General Council would go the way of the General Synod in allowing error to live, in giving false teaching equal footing with the truth, and then finally letting error rule supreme. Those two bodies demonstrate that such unionistic efforts are doomed to fail, no matter how good the intentions at the start. To unite without complete doctrinal agreement is hypocritical and anti-scriptural.

The second of the responses, while achieving little, perhaps no, outward unity, was solidly based upon Scripture and was the proper way to approach the subject of walking together in God's kingdom. Realizing that the only way Christians are truly united is when they agree on the truths of Scripture, Walther set out to appeal to the true heirs of the Book of Concord and the *Augsburg Confession*. "The strong opposition to the *Definite Platform* filled Walther with joy and caused him to hope that a united Lutheran Church

of America would soon come into being" (Lueker, 533). Throughout the whole process, though, Walther recognized the only basis for such a united church:

If one single Evangelical Lutheran Church, strong in unity, is to arise here, it can arise only through the unity of faith, through the awakening of the consciousness of the presence of such unity and through rallying around one Confession, as around a treasure which must be mutually defended and preserved (*Der Lutheraner*, XIII, 34--Lueker--552).

Walther let his desire and proposal be known on the pages of *Lehre und*

Wehre:

This constellation [that is, the united front of those loyal to the U.A.C.] certainly fills all who love the Lutheran Zion of this land with great joy and also with hope for the future. It has become evident that the number of those who do not bow, nor wish in the future to bow, their knee to the Baal of the so-called 'development' and the so-called 'higher enlightenment' of the 19th century, is without a doubt greater than our feeble faith or despair had believed. The more this strengthens the faith and the courage of all true Lutherans here, the more compelling is the challenge therein contained to nurture with supreme faithfulness and greatest diligence the unity which God through his marvelous grace has already wrought among us. We, at least for our little part, feel it a sacred duty to add our little bit...

So we venture openly to inquire: Would not meetings, held at intervals, by such members of churches as call themselves Lutheran and acknowledge and confess without reservation that the Unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530 is the pure and true statement of the doctrine of sacred Scripture and is also their own belief, promote and advance the efforts toward the final establishment of one single Evangelical Lutheran Church of America? We for our part would be ready with all our heart to take part in such a conference of truly believing Lutherans whenever and wherever such a conference would be held pursuant to the wishes of the majority of the participants...

Since it is true that many differences of opinion still exist among those Lutherans who hold with all their heart to the fundamental Confession of our Church, the treatment of which in our periodicals can more easily hinder than advance unity among us, the personal and verbal statements and expressions of opinions would above all else surely bring about this unparalleled blessing, namely, that the contest within our Church (which will always be necessary) will receive and keep the nature of a mutual competition among brethren for the faithful preservation of the precious gem of doctrinal purity and unity. (*Lehre und Wehre*, II, 3-6, quoted by Lueker, 533-535)

Sensing the ground-swell of support for this idea, Walther continued to push for these "free" conferences, "free" since "none of the participants was to appear as an official 'delegate' or 'representative' of any synod. (Nelson, 229). The excitement crossed synodical lines and soon the date was set for the first free conference. From October 1-7, 1856, 54 pastors and 19 laymen met at Columbus, Ohio. Those delegates came from within the Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, and Missouri synods. In addition, positive correspondence was received from pastors in the Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Iowa synods. Not surprisingly, one of the main topics of discussion at the conference was the adherence of its attendants to the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession*. "It was pointed out, however, that recent attacks on the *Augsburg Confession* had motivated the calling of the conference. For that reason it was of greatest importance that the delegates at the conference assure each other of their loyalty to the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession* not only in substance, but in all the parts" (Lueker, 543-44). That unity on this point was attained is evident from the resolution that came out of the conference:

Surely all who love our Lutheran Zion deplore with grief the sad divided state from which our Church suffers here in the United States of North America, and all earnestly desire to see the growth of this evil checked and all sincere Lutherans united on the basis of truth...We recognize also the sacred duty which devolves upon us children and members of this Church to do whatever we can through God's grace that the breaches in the walls of Zion be closed, that which is separated be united and, God willing, be formed into one Evangelical Lutheran church of North America...Hence we consider it our duty in a humble spirit to address all Lutherans in the United States of North America, individuals as well as synods, and to ask them that they together with us gather again about the good confession of our faithful, pious fathers and with us, before everything else, state freely, publicly, and without reservation that the fundamental Confession of our Evangelical Lutheran Church, the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, presented 1530 publicly to Emperor Charles V, is their own confession and that their faith set forth in it is in all respects the faith of their own heart (Lueker, 545).

The first conference was correctly judged to be a success, if for no other reason than Lutherans from all over were able to get together and realize that there were faithful, scriptural, and confessional Lutherans in other places. The excitement over this conference showed itself by the scheduling of a second conference, to be held October 29-November 4, 1857 in Pittsburgh. The conference was attended by 43 men from the Missouri, Ohio, New York, Tennessee, Pittsburgh, and the Norwegian synods. The discussions focused on the eighth article of the Augsburg confession--*What the Church is*. "It was agreed that four points were emphasized in this article:

1. That the Church consists of all believers.
2. As it appears on earth this Church is never totally free of hypocrites. These, however, are never members of the Church, but only mingled with it.
3. The means of grace are potent and efficacious even when administered by hypocrites and godless persons within the Church.
4. Hence it is permissible to receive the Word and the Sacraments from such persons (Lueker, 553-554)."

Articles IX and X were also discussed, as the conference affirmed the scriptural truths concerning Lord's Supper and Baptism.

A third free conference was held August 5-11, 1858, at Cleveland, Ohio with 45 attending. Missouri, Ohio, New York, and Tennessee were represented there. The conference discussed Articles XI-XIII, again completely agreeing publicly with Scripture on confession, repentance, and the use of the means of grace.

The fourth and final conference was held at Fort Wayne in July, 1859 without Walther attending due to bad health. A somewhat sticky issue that had been tabled at the first conference now arose among the members. Considering the background of the various synods in this country, it isn't very surprising that lively discussion should arise when speaking about

church and ministry (articles five and fourteen). The doctrine of the call and the office of the ministry were discussed at length. There was some confusion over the office of the pastor and the universal priesthood. The discussions yielded fruit as the conference agreed that the Confession described a wider use of the term "ministry" and a narrower use. It also recognized the different functions of the public ministry. It proclaimed that God is the One who calls His full-time servants and He does so through the congregation (Lueker 561).

This was to be the last of these free conferences, even though a fifth had been scheduled for the next year at Cleveland. "It is difficult to ascertain precisely what caused the demise of the conferences, but the fact that both Walther and the conference chairman...were absent in 1859 may have contributed to the disappearance of enthusiasm. Moreover the English-speaking Lutherans were at a disadvantage in German-dominated conferences" (Nelson, 230). Walther's ill health, and tension between Missouri and Ohio over the unionistic practices of a certain Pastor Koenig, probably more than anything put a damper on the attempts at unity.

These conferences were anything but fruitless, however. They served to get people to think about what they believed. It forced them to delve into the Word to find the answers to some hard questions. Anytime the starting point for discussion is God's truth, blessing is the result. That result may not be tangible to the participants immediately, but the Holy Spirit works when and where He wills. These conferences are a supreme example of that fact, for, as Lueker puts it, "the formation of the Synodical Conference of 1872 may safely be listed among the fruits of these endeavors" (563). The tangible evidence for Walther's efforts from 1856-1859 would not be realized for 13 years, yet what joy there was when the Holy Spirit led many of the

same participants in these free conferences to hold more of the same in 1871, resulting in the walking together of Lutherans in the Synodical Conference.

The idea of the free conference in this country did not die out after 1872. Faithful men of God have taken that same approach into the 20th century, fully realizing that the only way to true unity is through full agreement on the Scriptures. When those synods who left the Synodical Conference in the election controversy displayed a desire to discuss the doctrine again, the free conferences again came to the fore.

Just 20 years after the 1882-1883 first rending of the Synodical Conference over the doctrines of election and conversion...a replay of the controversy was enacted in a series of free conferences...(Fredrich, 170).

Those five free conferences, at which members of Missouri, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Iowa were present, did not serve to reestablish the break that had occurred a couple of decades earlier, but the approach was alive and well also in 1915:

When the intersynodical discussions of the doctrines of election and conversion in the early years of the century broke off amid even greater doctrinal disagreement than at the outset, the cause of Lutheran unity seemed hopelessly at dead end. No one could have surmised that within a decade a new effort along the same lines would be mounted. But that is just what happened (Fredrich, 270).

The efforts of which Prof. Fredrich speaks were the efforts of a group of pastors in Sibley County, MN. The "*Sibley County Theses*" arose out of this informal free conference, and gave impetus to a renewed effort on the part of the different synods to resolve the election/conversion debate. Despite the backing of over 500 Lutheran pastors from seven synods, the renamed "*St. Paul Theses*" and resultant meetings again reached an impasse. The mistake that had been made by the General Synod and General Council seemed also to be affecting the Ohio and Iowa synods, for "this failed effort at Lutheran unity revealed a "new" approach, a "different spirit" in

intersynodical dealings. Union was becoming more important than unity" (Fredrich, 277).

Sadly Walther's own synod began to toy with the same mistake, and the results of that dangerous dance with Satan are being played out before our very eyes. The free conference played a somewhat different role in our dealings with Missouri in the decades leading up to the break in 1961, but its results were much the same as they had been for Walther. As far as outward success, the conferences must be deemed as having failed. But once again, those conferences served to lead the participants into Scripture, to dig, delve, and find the solid scriptural foundation upon which to stand. That experience led our men to clarify, to set forth clearly what our confession is concerning God's Word, and in that most important respect, must be viewed as a huge success.

The free conference continues to be employed in our day, and by no means has it ever been, or is it now, confined to Lutheran circles. Nor is a free conference used to serve the purpose of seeking unity before union. Cross-denominational conferences are regularly being held, not in an effort to let God's Word speak, but in an effort to set aside "silly" historical differences, and to attain an ecumenical shell. But, closer to home, the free conference is being employed as it has been by our spiritual forefathers from the earliest days of the Christian Church on. Conservative voices within the troubled Missouri Synod, in an attempt to get back to the basics of God's Word, have called for and held a number of them over the past few years. Our own synod, by God's unfailing grace, will gather together in Germany with like-minded Lutheran Christians from around the world to search, discuss, confess, and walk together. As long as the free conferences serve to clarify, to lead people to a greater understanding of God's Word, to give

them an opportunity to express their God-given faith, and to gather together Christians who are willing to bow beneath the almighty Word, they serve a God-pleasing purpose. May He preserve us from the mistakes of history, and cause us to walk humbly, obediently beneath His gracious will!

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