

PRAYER FELLOWSHIP AT THE  
DETROIT CONFERENCE

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Church History  
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PRAYER FELLOWSHIP AT THE DETROIT CONFERENCE

The third intersynodical Lutheran free conference was held in Detroit, Michigan, from April 6 through April 9, 1904. The two previous conferences were held in May, 1903, in Watertown, Wis., and in September, 1903, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. (There was also a previous conference in Beloit, Wisc., in the fall of 1902, but that conference is usually not included in the list of five free intersynodical conferences from 1903 to 1906.)

The Detroit Conference met in downtown Detroit in a spacious hall which ironically happened to be named "Union Hall" (Harmonie-Halle). The conference was blessed with a rather good attendance. All told, 306 pastors signed the conference register book. This total of 306 may be broken down as follows:

Synodical Conference - 132	{	Missouri - 118
		Wisconsin - 6
		Minnesota - 3
		Eng. Missouri - 5

Ohio Synod - 94; Iowa Synod - 28  
Michigan Synod - 23 ; General Synod - 6 ; General Council - 7  
Norwegian Synod - 2 ; Buffalo Synod - 4 ; Hessen Conference - 6  
United Norwegian Church - 1 ; Canada Synod - 3.

In addition to the three hundred registered pastors there were also about 200 guests bringing the total in attendance at the conference to about 500.

The purpose of the conference was to bring about fellowship and union of the Lutheran bodies in America through discussing and resolving doctrinal differences. The three articles of difference to be discussed were: 1) predestination; 2) the

analogy of faith (the principle article of debate); 3) the interpretation of Scripture. These articles of discussion cannot be dealt with further in this paper.

The discussions were carried out in a spirit of love which displayed a sincere desire for agreement by all involved. Dr. F. W. Stellhorn later wrote: "It became very evident at this meeting that there is a fervant desire among the members of the different bodies represented there that, if at all possible, an agreement may be reached in the points at issue."<sup>1</sup>

Although the discussions were carried on in this loving spirit, they seemed doomed to failure from the very start. Both opposing sides (the Synodical Conference, on the one hand; and the synods of Iowa and Ohio, on the other hand) were determined beforehand to convert the other side over to their point of view.

The main speakers at the conference were as follows:

<u>Synodical Conference</u>		<u>Iowa and Ohio Synods</u>	
A. Hoenecke } A. Pieper }	Wisconsin	F.W. Stellhorn } H.A. Allwardt } C.H.L. Schuette }	Ohio
F. Pieper } G. Stoeckhardt } F. Bente }	Missouri	F. Richter } M. Fritschel } M. Reu }	Iowa

Other

H.C. Stub (Norwegian Synod)  
F.A. Schmidt (Unit. Norw. Ch.)  
F. Beer (Michigan)

The discussions were carried on for three days without any real agreement. On the morning of the last day of the conference (Friday morning) it was determined to resume the discussions at a fourth free intersynodical conference to be

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<sup>1</sup>F. W. Stellhorn, "Free Intersynodical Conference," Lutheran Standard, Vol. LXII (April 16, 1904), p 242.

held at Fort Wayne, Indiana in August or September of 1905.

Finally, on that same Friday morning, the subject of prayer-fellowship was brought forth. Previously, nothing had been said in a formal way concerning this subject, but it now became the topic of heated debate at the Conference.

In reporting the discussion on prayer fellowship which took place at the Detroit Conference we shall follow the details given in Der Lutherische Herold. While the conference was in the midst of a debate over whether small or large conferences should be held from then on, Pastor J. Vollmar of the Ohio Synod apparently had his mind on the matter of joint prayer at the conferences. Pastor Vollmar was disturbed (along with others from the Eastern churches) over the fact that joint prayer at the commencement and adjournment of these conferences had thus far been omitted. Pastor Vollmar interrupted the discussion of the size of the conferences, with the insinuation that any further conferences should be opened and closed with joint prayer. Pastor Vollmar said: "I am for the continuation of these conferences, but that we have accomplished so little seems to be our own fault. Even political conferences are opened with prayers; but we, who are assembled in the matters and interest of the kingdom of God, begin our sessions without prayer."

The remark was apparently aimed at the conference chairman who would have been responsible for suggesting joint prayer for the conference. Thus the chairman of the conference meeting, Prof. F. Pieper of the Missouri Synod, politely answered and said: "Even though no public and common prayer was conducted, each and every person in attendance implored the Lord's blessing

on our discussions in his heart."

At this point the topic of the discussion again became that of when, where and how the next conference would be held. But Adolph Hoenecke of the Wisconsin Synod rechanneled the conversation back to prayer fellowship. He said: "But we expect that the form of the gathering will remain the same, namely, without common prayer. Hopefully this will not be interpreted as lovelessness. It is not lovelessness when we refuse joint prayer. I know that I should love everyone with all my heart, but I cannot join in prayer with all who come together here. Common prayer presumes that all present here are wholly and entirely of one faith and belief. I have always asked silently for the blessing and assistance of the Holy Spirit. And the prayer, which asked God to bestow His mercy, has certainly been heard. Simply our being together shows that the prayer has been granted."

At this point Dr. Stellhorn of the Ohio Synod got up and voiced his opinion. He agreed with Pastor Vollmar's suggestion. Objecting to Dr. Hoenecke's remarks, Dr. Stellhorn suggested that the conference sessions should open with common liturgical worship. This would include a Psalm reading and a prayer at the beginning of each session, and the Lord's Prayer at the end of each session.

At this bold suggestion, Prof. Beer of the Michigan Synod sneered: "Now there's already a subject for our next conference." Prof. Beer saw that here was a point of bitter difference between the Synodical conference and the Ohio and Iowa Synods.

Pastor E. Gerfen of the Ohio Synod, ignoring Prof. Beer, declared his agreement with Dr. Stellhorn's suggestion. He said:

"That's how it was done in 1856 and later, when Missouri and Iowa were negotiating with each other. They read a chapter from the Bible, after which followed a silent prayer." (Note: In 1856 and later such prayer fellowship was deemed admissable by Dr. C.F.W. Walther because the Iowans were regarded as weak brethren. However, such was not the case here, so the comparison does not apply.)

Dr. Allwardt of the Ohio Synod saw an argument brewing on this the day of adjournment, so he impatiently tried to cut off the discussion of prayer fellowship by saying that the conference has enough to do and doesn't have time to make a decision on the matter of prayer fellowship. But Dr. F. Pieper of Missouri quickly objected: "The committee does not have to decide on the matter. No committee can decide such a question. The decision has long been made. Prayer communion is church communion. Over this the Word of God must decide. The Ohio Synod has broken off church communion with the Synodical conference, and now we come together and are asked without much ado to pray together. We must emphatically reject that, and we must reject the insinuation that prayers are not said for one another. However, if we pray together, we are then acting as if nothing had ever happened between us in earlier times."

Dr. Schuette of the Ohio Synod then spoke up. He said: "I beg you to name one reason why this prayer question should not be put on the committee's agenda. It is an undeniable fact that by starting these sessions without prayer much vexation has been caused in members of the assembly as well as the church at large. Whoever can pray with Gerhard and Chemnitz can also pray with us Ohioans. The position held by Dr. Pieper is all

just characteristical fanaticism (Schwaermerei). Those who do not want to pray with us, let them have their way. But we of the Ohio Synod want herewith to state in public that this offense did not originate with us." Obviously, the discussion had become quite heated by now.

The Synodical Conference representatives then responded to Dr. Schuette's accusations. First to speak was Prof. Stoeckhardt. He said: "We hold that it is against the Word of God to pray together with those who do not hold church fellowship with us. This is our opinion concerning this matter. This is a matter of conscience with us. The 'conditio sine qua non' for further conferences is NO COMMON PRAYER. With this we do not mean to say that our adversaries are un-christian, but we do declare that we can have no fellowship with one another without doctrinal agreement."

Prof. F. Pieper, also of Missouri, then spoke: "One speaks of giving offense. It is rather the opposite. We would create offense by joining in common prayer. Our adversaries would come under the suspicion of acting rashly when they called us Calvinists. God's Word decrees what constitutes giving offense."

At this point both sides saw that here was a point of bitter contention. Because neither side could see any chance for agreement on the matter, the subject of prayer fellowship was tabled until the next free conference.

Apparently, the subject of lack of prayer fellowship at the free conferences had been a source of irritation to the members of the Ohio and Iowa synods for quite some time. In the May, 1903 conference at Watertown the chairman was a member

of the Wisconsin Synod and the Synodical conference. This conference chairman, Prof. Ernst, when taking the presidential chair had remarked in a matter-of-fact manner that the sessions would not begin with common prayer. Likewise, in the September, 1903 free conference in Milwaukee the chairman was a member of the Synodical conference. He invited the delegates to silent prayer since a common prayer was not in order.

After the discussion of prayer fellowship at the Detroit conference, the members of Ohio and Iowa voiced their opinions concerning the actions of the Synodical Conference. They branded Missouri and Wisconsin as "bigoted, narrow-minded, arrogant, stubborn, and Pharisaical." In the next few months before the next free conference was to be held, opponents on both sides used their various periodicals to air their views on joint prayer at the free conferences.

The position of the Synodical Conference was ably stated by a lengthy article from the pen of Dr. F. Bente (Missouri Synod) in Lehre und Wehre. Dr. Bente laid out the Scriptural principles that were behind the Synodical Conference's refusal to join in common prayer at the free conferences. Briefly, those reasons may be summarized as follows: 1) Ohio and Iowa cannot be considered as weak brethren in need of our brotherly support. They do not consider themselves as such, and we cannot either. 2) The Synodical Conference must show their objection to the false teaching of Ohio and Iowa by refraining from joint prayer. This is an act of confession. 3) The clear Word of God forbids prayer fellowship or any other unionism with bodies which are not in doctrinal agreement with the Synodical conference. 4) It is the duty of the Synodical Conference to confess Christ by refusing joint prayer. 5) By practicing fellowship with Ohio



and Iowa would mean that the Synodical Conference would take the sins of Iowa and Ohio upon themselves. 6) By entering in on common prayer the Synodical Conference would have pretended to be something that they are not, namely, in fellowship with Ohio and Iowa. 7) Such joint prayer with other bodies would have been a cause of offense. 8) Joining fellowship with Ohio and Iowa would only lead to fellowship with any and all sects.

Thus prayer fellowship at Detroit and at any future conferences could not become a reality. The Synodical Conference had to reject the proposal of Ohio and Iowa on the basis of the clear Word of God. After the free conference in Fort Wayne on the previous year, the Synodical Conference decided not to participate in any further free intersynodical conferences. This desire was made known at a final session the following year, and the conferences were then dropped.

The debate over prayer fellowship at the Detroit conference, and the ensuing debate via periodicals is a fine lesson for us of the Wisconsin Synod today. We must display the same courage and boldness as our forefathers did seventy years ago when we are faced with a similar problem. The Word of God still must guide our actions today in an age when church bodies are urging ecumenism with great enthusiasm. We only regret that the Missouri Synod has forgotten the principles which she so ably defended in 1904. Oh that Missouri would re-read Dr. Bente's article in Lehre und Wehre, and take it to heart! On the other hand, may we never cease to thank God that He has graciously kept the Wisconsin Synod true to the principles of Scripture which the Synodical Conference so ably defended at the Detroit conference in 1904.

Credit must be given to  
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