

What Part Did the 1938 Convention of the Missouri  
Synod Play in Their Doctrinal Downfall?

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Church History  
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May 5, 1972

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It is doubtful whether this paper will offer the Professor anything new. But the reading done in preparation for this paper has served to satisfy in part some of the curiosity questions which I myself had concerning the doctrinal downfall of Missouri. One of the obvious questions is: How does such a movement start? As Kuster points out in his doctoral thesis, "The Fellowship Dispute in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod: A Rhetorical Study of Ecumenical Change," there are two exigences involved in the fellowship dispute. They are the desire for unity and the desire for pure doctrine. As long as the desire for unity was governed by the desire for pure doctrine, the two were compatible and complementary. However, in the fellowship dispute the desire for unity took precedence and was accomplished at the expense of the desire for pure doctrine. Consequently the dispute.

Obviously such a change in priorities does not take place overnight. The seeds of such a change may lie dormant for some time. But I have come to the conclusion in my reading that the 1938 synodical convention made available the opportunity for these seeds to blossom. First of all it opened the door for the traditional view to be publicly challenged. Secondly, the convention may have caused enough confusion to start the Synod thinking in terms of union over pure doctrine. Finally, it began the "dickering process."

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The American Lutheran Church, in their doctrinal discussions with the Missouri Synod, asked for latitude of interpretation in four "non-fundamental" doctrines. In their convention report committee #16 stated in the case of three of these doctrines (the Anti-Christ, conversion of the Jews, and the resurrection of the martyrs) that the difference of teaching "need not be divisive of church-fellowship."<sup>1</sup> The fact that committee #16 made this statement already challenged the traditional Missouri stand on complete adherence to their body of doctrine. Even though the 1941 convention attempted to erase any misunderstanding that might have been conveyed in the 1938 resolutions, nevertheless, the door had been opened for public debate. The American Lutheran became the voice of the union advocates. Since the Lutheran Witness under Graebner leaned toward unionism, the Confessional Lutheran was organized in 1940 to advocate pure doctrine. As Kuster points out, the American Lutheran used pragmatic argumentation while the Confessional Lutheran based their argumentation strictly on Scriptural principles. The result was that while the pragmatic argumentation was not correct, nevertheless, it appealed more and was more readily digested by the synod constituency. The result was that the union advocates gained the greater following. The 1938 resolutions had opened the door to this dispute and challenged the traditional fellowship principles.

The 1938 convention was also capable of causing confusion.

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1. Proceedings of the Thirty-Eighth Regular Convention (Missouri Synod), pp. 229-230.

It is impossible to prove in statistics that the 1938 resolutions did this. But one can't deny that the announcement of doctrinal fellowship between Missouri and the A.L.C. certainly didn't hurt the cause of the union advocates. When Graebner reported on the 1938 convention in the article entitled, "Doctrinal Basis for Union,"<sup>2</sup> he emphasized the awareness of the delegates concerning the union issue and the unanimity of the convention on accepting the 1938 resolutions. Certainly the readers of his article must have come away with the impression that the A.L.C. had completely come around to Missouri's side and that there was no doubt that true unity existed. Following events soon proved the contrary. It is pretty difficult to see how confusion caused by the "glowing" reports of union brought on by the 1938 resolutions could have been cleared up by the succeeding convention especially in view of the "dickering" that went on after the next several conventions.

In 1941 President John Brenner of the Wisconsin Synod reported to the Wisconsin Synod Convention at Watertown: "To continue negotiations under present conditions will, as we warned in Watertown, turn testifying into denying. It will create the impression of "dickering" in confessional matters, will confirm the opponents in their "unfirm Attitude," and will continue to cause confusion and disturbance in the Church."<sup>3</sup> This is what happened after the 1938 convention. In 1938 the convention advocated:

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2. Lutheran Witness, July 26, 1938, pp. 252-3.

3. Proceedings, (Wis. Synod), 1941, pp. 76-77.

Until church-fellowship has been officially established, the pastors of both church-bodies are encouraged to meet in smaller circles wherever and as often as possible in order to discuss both the doctrinal basis for union and questions of church practise. 4

The convention of 1941 encouraged:

That pastors of both church bodies be encouraged to continue to meet in smaller circles wherever - and as often as - possible, in order to discuss both the doctrinal basis of unity and the questions of church practice;"5

This continued encouragement eventually led to prayer fellowship and then into cooperation in "externals."

As Brenner warned in the report to the 1941 convention, such negotiations would "turn testifying into denying." 6

Because the 1938 convention overstated the case on doctrinal unity, it recommended that intersynodical discussions be discussed on the conference level. Had the 1938 convention not been so quick to declare doctrinal unity, the "dickerings" of succeeding years might have been avoided.

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4. Proceedings, (Missouri Synod), 1938, p.232.

5. Proceedings, (Missouri Synod), 1941, p.302.

6. Proceedings, (Wisconsin Synod), 1941, p. 76.

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