

The 1904 Free Conferences in Michigan

by Carl Lawrenz

One of the resolutions¹ adopted by the Cleveland convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod states: “In meeting with other Lutheran bodies (not in fellowship) for the purpose of discussing doctrine, joint prayer has been practiced in the early and in the present-day history of our Synod and of sister synods....” Among the examples then listed we find: “2. meeting with Michigan Synod in 1904.” Also this example is adduced to supply a precedent for the current contention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod that the mere fact that church bodies meet to discuss doctrine, even though they are not yet united in doctrine and practice, warrants treating joint prayer at such a meeting as a matter merely to be dealt with in Christian judgment.

Do the meetings held between Missouri Synod and Michigan Synod² pastors in 1904 actually constitute such a precedent? The present writer fails to find such a precedent in these free conferences upon studying some of the available contemporary accounts.³ The very considerations which led to these meetings, the entire character of the discussions as they were carried out, and the great caution exercised in the matter of joint devotions rather point in another direction. All these things show a keen awareness of the historical Synodical Conference position on confessional fellowship. These meetings give evidence of the conviction held in the Synodical Conference that Scripture forbids any exercise of church fellowship, also in joint prayer and devotions, among those who are not yet united in doctrine and practice, but that Scripture encourages those to join in worship who really share a common position on doctrine and practice, who let this be known, and who are determined to contend for this sound position. We see in the 1904 free conferences in Michigan a conscientious effort to apply this conviction in an evangelical manner.

The Michigan Synod had been a charter member of the General Council of the Lutheran Church in America for twenty-one years. During all these years it had hoped against hope that the General Council might still come to a clear confessional position on the “Four Points,” particularly on the matters of pulpit and altar fellowship. When in 1884 during the General Council convention in the Monroe congregation of the Michigan Synod English pastors of the General Council again undertook to preach in a local Presbyterian church and no action was taken against this matter, it became quite evident to the Michigan Synod that the General Council meant to persist in its unionistic practice. Consequently the Michigan Synod withdrew from the General Council in 1888. A strong desire to join the Synodical Conference now manifested itself in its midst and plans were made in this direction.

Contacts between Michigan and Minnesota Synod pastors in 1891 stirred up interest in a plan whereby these two synods would join the Wisconsin Synod in forming a larger Lutheran church federation. Articles of Agreement to form the General Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Other States⁴ were actually adopted by the three synods in 1892. To effect this federation it became necessary for the Michigan Synod to join the Synodical Conference. It did become a member at the Synodical Conference Convention in the very same year of 1892. One of the major items of the Articles of Agreement on the basis of which the General

¹ *Proceedings of the Forty-fifth Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, Cleveland, Ohio, June 20–29, 1962, the *Theology of Fellowship*, Resolution 3–28, p. 110. Also *Proceedings of the Forty-seventh Convention of the Lutheran Synodical Conference*, assembled at St. James Lutheran Church, Chicago, Illinois, Nov. 13–15, 1962, p. 60.

² Its official name was the *Evangelisch-Lutherische Synode von Michigan u. a. St.*

³ Reports in the *Lutheraner*, official organ of the Missouri Synod: Nov. 8, 1904, pp. 355–357; Nov. 22, 1904, pp. 272–273; Dec. 20, 1904, pp. 87–88. Reports in the *Evangelisch-Lutherischer Synodal-Freund*, official organ of the Michigan Synod; Aug. 1904, pp. 87–88; June 1906, p. 67. *Kurzgefasste Geschichte der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Synode von Michigan u. a. St.*, pp. 41–52.

⁴ *Allgemeine Synode von Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan u. a. St.* Until 1917 it was a federation of independent Synods, each of which held individual membership in the Synodical Conference. In 1917 the three synods became one church body, thereafter holding a single membership in the Synodical Conference, and bearing the name of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States. In 1959 this name was shortened to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

Synod was formed was the joint use and support of the Wisconsin Synod's theological seminary, for which a new building was being erected at Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. This meant converting the theological seminary of the Minnesota Synod at New Ulm, Minnesota, into a teachers' college and the theological Seminary of the Michigan Synod at Saginaw, Michigan, into a preparatory school for church workers. All the stipulations for the forming of the General Synod were, however, accepted also by the Michigan Synod.

Nevertheless, a large group of Michigan Synod pastors, including members of the theological faculty, were very much opposed to the closing of their theological seminary at Saginaw. At the 1894 convention of the Michigan Synod this group succeeded in electing a new president and several other synodical officers who shared their viewpoint. Controversy now ensued on the seminary issue both in its own midst and with the General Synod. At its 1896 convention at Sturgis the Michigan Synod resolved without debate to withdraw from the General Synod and also from the Synodical Conference. Even before this convention President C. F. Boehner of the Michigan Synod had already suspended ten pastors of his synod. They had opposed the repudiation of the agreements which the Michigan Synod had made in joining the Wisconsin and Minnesota Synods to form the General Synod; they had also testified against Boehner's glaring malpractices⁵ as synodical president. At the 1896 convention these ten suspended pastors were then excluded from the Michigan Synod. They now formed the District Synod of Michigan and remained in affiliation with the Wisconsin and Minnesota Synods in the General Synod.

In leaving the Synodical Conference the Michigan Synod had been careful to state in its resolution that it still intended to abide by the doctrine and practice of the Synodical Conference and was withdrawing from membership merely in the interest of establishing peace in its own midst and so as not to disturb the Synodical Conference with its controversies, particularly with the Wisconsin Synod. The Synodical Conference had in the meantime heard complaints from the representatives of the District Synod of Michigan attending the 1896 Synodical Conference sessions and had appointed a Synodical Conference committee with instructions to attend the Sturgis convention of the Michigan Synod in order to adjudicate the matters at issue. The Sturgis convention of 1896, however, refused to hear the Synodical Conference committee. As a result the various synods of the Synodical Conference had to publish the fact that the Michigan Synod had left the Synodical Conference, and that the efforts of preventing this through the services of a Synodical Conference committee had been unsuccessful.

The Michigan Synod now formed a federation with the Augsburg Synod, a somewhat loosely organized group of heterogeneous Lutheran congregations. By 1900 it had become obvious, however, that various congregations of the Augsburg Synod were by no means in agreement with the Michigan Synod in doctrine and practice and would do nothing to establish such unity. Thus this federation was again terminated. By this time President Boehner and several others, who had been the prime leaders in the secession from the General Synod and the Synodical Conference and in the brief affiliation with the Augsburg Synod, had left the Michigan Synod.

On the other hand, the majority of the pastors of the Michigan Synod began to realize that the secession from the Synodical Conference and from the General Synod had really been unwarranted and precipitate, and that they belonged back in the Synodical Conference. The realization also grew that the expulsion of the ten pastors who had subsequently formed the District Synod of Michigan had not been in accord with good Scriptural and Lutheran practice. Many of the Michigan pastors discussed these matters privately with neighboring Missouri Synod pastors. Some of the Michigan Synod pastors, though sound in principle, were still struggling to maintain good Lutheran practice, particularly also in the matter of a consistent lodge practice. The fellowship of conservative neighboring Lutheran congregations would be helpful. *How could a return to the Synodical Conference and a reconciliation with its constituent bodies, also with the Wisconsin Synod, be effected?* In a commendable Christian spirit pastors of the Missouri Synod offered their good services. Two free conferences between concerned Missouri and Michigan Synod pastors were held. Though some of the

⁵ *Proceedings of the Ev. Luth. District Synod of Michigan*, Nov. 17–19, 1896, pp. 9–33.

participants were officials in their respective church bodies, they did not participate in these free conferences in their official capacity but as concerned individuals.

The first of these free conferences was held July 12–13, 1904, at Jackson, Michigan, in the schoolhouse of Pastor Spiegel, at that time President of the Michigan District of the Missouri Synod. According to the *Lutheraner* 13 Missouri and 11 Michigan Synod pastors were present. Pastor M. Bode reporting in the *Synodal-Freund* credits each group with one further participant, but admits that he is relying upon his memory. In this same report of the *Synodal-Freund* the occasion for this free conference is set forth in this manner: When the Michigan Synod had left the Synodical Conference it had asserted that it was still abiding by the doctrine and practice of this church body. This had also been reasserted at subsequent conventions of the Michigan Synod. Difficulties had indeed arisen on occasion concerning practice. Gradually many Michigan Synod pastors had, however, felt an ardent desire for a return to Synodical Conference affiliation. When this had been expressed before neighboring Missouri Synod pastors and had met with a joyful response, this conference at Jackson was planned.

The conference program as arranged in advance called for an introductory address and for an essay on the question: What is required according to Augustana VII for true unity? All that is stated with reference to the opening of the conference is that those in attendance were briefly welcomed by Pastor Spiegel. Pastor H. Speckhard of the Missouri Synod congregation of Saginaw then gave what is termed in the reports as his earnest introductory address. He referred to the Michigan Synod's former membership in the Synodical Conference and then contrasted with it the present regrettable lack of fellowship. He pointed out how in 1896 President Boehner of the Michigan Synod had refused to give a hearing to the Synodical Conference Committee sent to discuss the charges which had been raised against the Michigan Synod. The unwillingness of the Michigan Synod to listen to the concerns of its brethren had made it necessary for the synods of the Synodical Conference to declare that they could no longer consider the Michigan Synod an orthodox Lutheran church body. Yet both groups now claimed to hold to the same position in doctrine and practice. They were therefore gathered here to assure themselves that such unity really obtained, an endeavor which in itself was quite foreign to the unionistic tendencies of the day. This so-called earnest introductory address was then thoroughly discussed and in its full substance accepted by all the participants.

The essay: What is required according to Augustana VII for true unity? was now presented by Pastor E. A. Mayer, of the Missouri Synod congregation at Frankenmuth, Michigan. He, first of all, took up the point: What is not necessary for true unity? He pointed out that agreement is not necessary in rites and ceremonies unless they have confessional implications. He also pointed out that various arrangements for church work, no matter how wholesome they may be at any given time, such as the Christian day school, confirmation instruction, communion announcements, synodical organizations, are still not necessary for true unity. Then the essayist entered upon the second point: What is sufficient for true unity, but indispensable for it? He asserted that what is necessary and indispensable is a confession to Scripture as the only source and norm for Christian and theological understanding. As Lutherans we express this through our adherence to the Lutheran Confessions. Demanded is a clear position on the doctrine of inspiration over against the figment of the entirety of Scripture (*Schriftganzes*), also over against the theory of open questions in pulpit fellowship, prayer fellowship (note that this is mentioned in the *Synodal-Freund*), and discipline. Likewise necessary is true Scriptural practice. True Lutheran teaching demands and works true Christian practice. No pulpit and altar fellowship with errorists is possible, also no indiscriminate burying of people with Christian rites, or the tolerance of lodge membership and of tyrannical synodical practice.

After some thorough discussions this essay was likewise accepted by all the participants of this free conference. The *Lutheraner* informs us that this unity in doctrine and practice was expressed on the part of all present by rising. It was resolved to hold a second conference, if possible, at Saginaw at the beginning of September. This second conference was to discuss the question: What must be done on the part of the Michigan Synod, so that eventually there will be nothing to hinder it from joining the Synodical Conference. It was also resolved to publish in pamphlet form the introductory message, the essay, and all the subsequent resolutions of

this first free conference, so that also those not present might become fully informed. Then this free conference was closed with the singing of a hymn and with prayer.

An editorial note attached to the report in the *Synodal-Freund* points out that up to this time this free conference had been wholly a private matter, and that the Michigan Synod as such had not been involved in it. The note hastens to add, however, that at its next convention the Michigan Synod would inevitably have to occupy itself with it.

From this survey it should be quite evident that the joint worship with which this free conference closed was wholly in keeping with the historical Synodical Conference position on the practice of confessional fellowship. Those participating in this free conference joined in worship after the unanimous acceptance of the earnest address and the comprehensive essay had shown that for their own person all present were truly one in doctrine and practice, that as the authorization of the publication of a pamphlet showed they all meant to make their common position known, and that they were determined to work toward having this position accepted throughout the Michigan Synod. Both the editorial note in the *Synodal-Freund* and the topic assigned for the second free conference gave evidence of such a determination.

At the Intersynodical Free Conference at Detroit during April 6–8 of the same year Synodical Conference participants had spoken out forthrightly against opening the next free conference planned for Fort Wayne with joint prayer. They did so with the testimony that public joint prayer would be an expression of church fellowship and thus would give the false impression that all present were united in a common faith and that the doctrinal differences which still obtained among the various participants were of no further vital significance.⁶ Yet the fact that Missouri Synod pastors closed the free conference at Jackson with a joint devotion, while the Missouri Synod pastors present at the Detroit conference opposed joint prayer, does not reveal a varied judgment on the matter of prayer fellowship within the Missouri Synod. Both instances reveal a conscientious and responsible application of the Synodical Conference's Scriptural position on Church Fellowship.

Also those participating in the intersynodical discussions at Detroit were there for the purpose of striving to reach doctrinal unity with other Lutherans not in fellowship with them. Yet it was evident from the discussions to the Synodical Conference men that many participants at this free conference were not yet one with them in doctrine, that for the time being they were still staunchly defending the un-Scriptural confessional position of the church bodies to which they belonged. Hence, in spite of the willingness of these men to discuss the doctrines in controversy, they still had to be recognized as persistent errorists, and joint worship with them would be displeasing to the Lord. At the free conference at Jackson Missouri Synod men, however, showed that they also knew how to apply the Synodical Conference principles of Church fellowship in an evangelical manner to an altogether different situation, one in which they were dealing with men whom the discussions had clearly revealed as confessional brethren, brethren who were struggling with past weaknesses and who were intent upon correcting mistakes into which their own church body had fallen in the past. In both instances we have the kind of application which our Wisconsin Synod has advocated in its Theses on Church Fellowship, rather than a mechanical application of rules.

The second free conference under consideration was held at Saginaw, Michigan, September 13–14, 1904, in the congregation of Pastor J. Westendorf, the president of the Michigan Synod. Present were twenty-four Missouri Synod participants, nineteen from the Michigan Synod. After some words of greeting from Pastor Westendorf this second free conference was organized by the appointment of Pastor P. Budach as chairman and of Pastor E. Partenfelder as secretary, and by the registration of the names of all the participants. Again only that was to be put into the minutes which was unanimously accepted by all present.

According to the stipulation of the first free conference Pastor H. Speckhard now submitted an essay on the topic: What must be done on the part of the Michigan Synod, so that eventually there will be nothing to hinder it from joining the Synodical Conference? This essay was read in its entirety, was thoroughly discussed part by part during the course of three sessions, and then unanimously accepted.

⁶ *Lehre und Wehre*, April 1904, p. 176.

In his introductory remarks the essayist stressed that he was carrying out his assignment from a deep desire to enter upon a God-pleasing union with the Michigan Synod. This moved him to speak both in the interest of love and of the truth. All present at the first free conference had declared their unity in Christian doctrine and practice by accepting Pastor Mayer's essay. This unity the Michigan Synod had already declared when it had joined the Synodical Conference in 1892. The Proceedings of the Michigan Synod Convention of 1903 had very recently underscored this position. They contained a fine declaration concerning Scripture as the only source and norm for faith and life, and as the inspired and inerrant Word of God in its total content and wording rather than as a mere record of God's revelation. The clear assertion of a *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions in these Proceedings was equally assuring. The confessional stand of the Michigan Synod could therefore not offer a hindrance to its acceptance in the Synodical Conference. Nothing further could be demanded of the Michigan Synod with reference to its official confessional position. Any hindrances would have to be found elsewhere.

Pastor Speckhard then went on to point to a twofold hindrance. The first of these lay in the manner in which the Michigan Synod had left the Synodical Conference and the position into which it had thereby placed itself over against its constituent synods. The mere fact that the Michigan Synod had withdrawn from the organization of the Synodical Conference had not put its orthodox Lutheran character into question, inasmuch as it had declared that it wanted to remain one in doctrine and practice with the Synodical Conference. Yet the manner of its withdrawal had been divisive. Though in becoming a member of the Synodical Conference it had accepted also article three of the Synodical Conference Constitution, the Michigan Synod had refused to enter in upon a discussion of the charges which had been brought against its practice under the obtaining leadership. Instead of hearing the Synodical Conference Commission sent for this purpose to its convention, the Michigan Synod had passed a resolution to withdraw from the Synodical Conference without allowing any previous debate on this matter. With this procedure it had denied sound Lutheran practice and had made it impossible for other church bodies to come to its defense.

The essayist stated, however, that the Michigan Synod had in the meantime already made a good beginning in re-establishing its orthodox Lutheran character on this point of difficulty. The leaders principally responsible for the unbrotherly and hasty action of 1896 were no longer members of the Michigan Synod. Even more pertinent were the recent resolutions⁷ of the August 18–23 convention of the Michigan Synod at Riga. In these resolutions, which were now read before the free conference, the official delegates of the Michigan Synod had declared that at this date they could not help recognizing the withdrawal from the Synodical Conference in 1896 as unjustified and precipitate, for they would have to say that neither a need nor any reasons of conscience had compelled them to this action, that in fact there had been no real cause for it; they likewise expressed their deep regret over the fact that the Michigan Synod had refused to receive the Synodical Conference commission at that time, to give it a fair hearing, and to avail themselves of its good services. Whatever extenuating circumstances⁸ were still listed in these resolutions by way of explanation did not alter this candid confession.

After hearing the text of these resolutions essayist Speckhard stated that the Michigan Synod had already done everything that needed to be done in this respect, so that there would be no further need of presenting what he had meant to suggest. The Missouri Synod men present expressed their joy over the fact that so soon and so clearly the Michigan Synod had removed the offense created by the manner of its withdrawal from the Synodical Conference. The Michigan Synod men pointed out that this had been done before it had come to their church body as a demand, because it had become a growing conviction in their midst, and that it was their own heartfelt conviction. By a unanimous vote the Missouri Synod participants declared that as far as the Missouri Synod was concerned this hindrance to Synodical Conference membership had been removed.

Pastor Speckhard then touched upon the point that synods could be accepted in the Synodical Conference only by a unanimous decision of all its constituent synods. Hence the relation of the Michigan Synod to the General Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Other States, especially to the District

⁷ *Synodal-Freund*, August 1904, p. 107.

⁸ *Ibid.*, October 1904, pp. 118–119.

Synod of Michigan, would also have to be taken into consideration. The District Synod of Michigan, the pastors ousted from the Michigan Synod in 1896 and their congregations, had raised accusations of un-Lutheran and tyrannical practice. The essayist therefore suggested a committee which would invite the District Synod of Michigan to friendly discussions in this matter. Since the accusations were principally against men no longer in the Michigan Synod, it ought to be rather easy to settle this matter and a full investigation of all the charges would not be necessary. The Michigan Synod pastors present ought to disavow the practice of former president Boehner as unLutheran. Such a declaration would follow the Synodical Conference directions set forth for settling disputes on page 38 of the Proceedings of its third convention. After some pertinent letters of President Boehner were read before the free conference, the Michigan Synod participants did disavow Boehner's practice with reference to the expulsion of the pastors now belonging to the District Synod of Michigan. The free conference then appointed a committee to confer with the District Synod of Michigan.

With reference to a final cause of hindrance to Synodical Conference membership on the part of the Michigan Synod, Pastor Speckhard stressed the need for a full application of acknowledged principles of Lutheran practice. This was particularly directed against weaknesses of practice still in evidence with reference to lodge membership and the burial of nonconfessing individuals. The Michigan Synod pastors unanimously expressed their agreement also to this matter as set forth by the essayist. One man did not vote on one point on which he still desired further clarity. Several special cases of practice were adjudicated here at the free conference and provisions were made to settle others. The report in the *Lutheraner* has the comment that all the pastors of the Michigan Synod ought to show progress in their practice similar to that evidenced by the Michigan Synod pastors present at this second free conference.

The writer of the *Lutheraner* report on this second free conference, again Pastor Speckhard, states that God had clearly blessed all the deliberations and had permitted the desired goal to be reached, so far as this could be done in an unofficial meeting. The pastors of both synods, Missouri and Michigan, who were present, could with a good conscience express their full unity in doctrine and practice by rising and by passing the resolution that the closing of the second conference take place with the singing of a hymn and with prayer. The conference therefore closed with the singing of *Lob, Ehr, und Preis sei Gott*, and with the Lord's Prayer spoken by the chairman.

Let us note that this expanded group again did not open with joint devotions. They closed with joint worship after all present had again registered their full assent to a common position on doctrine and practice and of its application to the situation under consideration, and after they had resolved as a group to make this position known and to follow it up with measures by which the church bodies to which they belonged could be restored to official fellowship.

The hopes of the 1904 free conferences were realized and their good services were blessed with success. On April 24–25, 1906, a free conference was held between the pastoral conferences of the Michigan Synod and the District Synod of Michigan. Full reconciliation and a re-establishment of fellowship was effected. The Michigan Synod deplored the unbrotherly manner in which they had terminated the obligations which they had willingly assumed in the formation of the General Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Other States. The Michigan Synod also renounced the practice of its Synod which had culminated in the expulsion of the pastors of the District Synod of Michigan. The District Synod of Michigan withdrew the accusation of false doctrine and deplored that such sharp expressions had been used in the heat of controversy.

At its April 1909 convention at Fort Atkinson the General Synod made provision for readmitting both groups as a reunited Michigan Synod. The reunion was effected in May 1910, whereby the Michigan Synod resumed its status as a constituent synod of the General Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Other States.

What a contrast between these free conferences of 1904, closed but very advisedly not opened with joint worship, and the recent National Lutheran Council-Missouri Synod meetings, for whose joint devotions the meetings at Jackson and Saginaw are supposed to supply an approving precedent! The meetings of 1904 were true free conferences, meetings of individuals and not of official representatives of church bodies. The participants had a common concern of fostering the re-establishment of fellowship relations of the church

bodies to which they belonged, and that on the basis of full unity in doctrine and practice. They entered upon their discussions with the strong conviction that they were of one mind and spirit but nevertheless refrained from joining in worship until this unity had been fully established in the discussions, until provisions had been made to let their common position become generally known, and until measures had been set into motion whereby their respective church bodies could be restored to official fellowship. The recent discussions between the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the National Lutheran Council church bodies, though conducted throughout in the framework of common devotions, have been meetings of official representatives of church bodies whose official confessional positions are at variance even on such a vital matter as the very nature and scope of Scripture. The principal objective set for these discussions, the formation of an agency for cooperative church work, reckons with the fact that for the immediate future full unity in doctrine could not be entertained and attained. For the representatives of the National Lutheran Council bodies such full unity of doctrine and practice is not even considered as a vital and necessary goal.

But let us not miss the most important truth that we can learn from the information which the accounts of the past give us concerning these free conferences of 1904. It is the truth that faithful observance of the Scriptural principles of church fellowship can and does foster confessional unity. For such faithful observance is essentially faithfulness to Scripture as God's precious Word, and it flows out of a deep concern for God's Word as our bread of life. Where this Word is truly treasured in faith it can, as this historical survey reminds us, effect the humility that is necessary for those who have erred from Scriptural doctrine or practice to correct their past mistakes, and likewise effect the humility that is needed for those who have clung to Scriptural doctrine and practice to speak the truth in love to the erring and to help them return to a common faithfulness in the Gospel.