

“A Little Bit of Yeast...”

Prayer fellowship/Joint prayer and its beginning in the Missouri Synod

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History **can** repeat itself to be sure. But part of what sends history into such a cyclical spin is that the subsequent generations tend to make the same mistakes. Why? Certainly sin has an effect upon every human judgment. But people are also very often guilty of not being familiar with their own history. It is astonishing to glance back through the pages of our own confessional Lutheran heritage and to recognize many of the same doctrinal conflicts that we struggle with today.

Doctrinal controversy can be positive. It forces God’s people to reexamine why they do what they do. It often triggers a “back to the scriptures” sentiment that revitalizes and strengthens a struggling church. To paraphrase one of my seminary professors “Christianity is never more than one generation old. Each generation must grasp the truths of God’s Word and make it their very own.”¹ God has certainly given us a gift through our spiritual forefathers, but we cannot rely solely upon them. Each generation must apply God’s magnificent gift of salvation to itself. That is subjective justification.

But we do not welcome false teaching either. Through his inspired writers, God continually warns his church about the dangers of doctrinal error. Satan picks at and sows in and works so subtly to undermine the foundation of our Gospel confidence. And that is the key. Doctrinal inconsistency starts small. Explore the beginnings of many a former confessional church body turned sour and error in “insignificant/non-fundamental” doctrines is generally close at hand.

¹Bits ‘o wisdom gleaned from Professor Richard Gurgel, Senior Dogmatics class, 2002.

Our break with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod was caused by some glaring doctrinal incongruities, but in the earliest stages, lying hidden and just out of sight were the subtle errors and misinterpretations of God's innerant word. That is where the focus of this paper lies. Not so much in pointing an accusing finger at our erring brothers, but to emphasize first and foremost for myself, the importance of sound doctrinal purity both in theology and practice. It is easy to look in hindsight at a situation and make judgments about it. But many men involved directly, both in the Wisconsin Synod and the LCMS, were well aware of and sought answers to the problems that seemed so infinitesimal. Unfortunately their warnings went unheeded.

Although this paper deals primarily with *A Statement*, it should be noted that the door was left at least partially open for error at the LCMS 1938 synodical convention. The American Lutheran Church asked Missouri for latitude in four "non-fundamental" doctrines. The Missouri committee that dealt with the request acquiesced in the case of three of those doctrines (the Anti-Christ, conversion of the Jews, and the resurrection of the martyrs) and insisted that the difference in teaching "need not be divisive of church fellowship."² Even though the 1941 convention attempted to erase any misunderstandings conveyed by the 1938 resolutions, still the questions that had been raised were breeding new proponents.

In 1942, the National Lutheran Council issued an invitation to all of the Lutheran synods. The Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods declined but Missouri said yes. This was not an indication of wholesale unionism, but it was a start. The acceptance letter written by President Behnken of Missouri betrays the reservations that he still had about this type of fellowship:

²*Proceedings of the Thirty-Eighth Regular Convention* (Missouri Synod), (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1944), pp. 229-230.

We accept this invitation with the understanding that we are not members of the N.L.C. Hence we are not assuming any responsibilities for the meeting.

For obvious reasons, - and I hope that this will not be misunderstood or misrepresented, - we are not taking part in the devotional worship and shall be present for only the business meeting.³

Finally in 1944 at a synod convention in Saginaw, MI, two resolutions were passed that laid bare the intentions of a growing number of pastors in the Missouri synod. "Missouri abandoned its former position to Boy-Scouting, and at the same convention, passed a resolution which approved a distinction between prayer fellowship and joint prayer."⁴ Appraising the situation as we are now, some 60 years later it seems that this final effort meant that there was no turning back for the Missouri Synod.

When *A Statement* was produced in 1945 President Behnken received a copy shortly before it was to be sent out. Behnken asked Dr. E.J. Friedrich to postpone any circulation of the document until he had returned from a trip to Europe. The Forty-Four ignored the President's plea and "mailed *A Statement* and its companion letter to all clergymen of Synod the very next day, September 20, 1945."⁵

What was this document? *A Statement* consisted of twelve theses which were followed by nine statements decrying certain practices within the Missouri Synod. Many of these affirmations could be understood correctly. But several of them simply flew in the face of the scriptural doctrine of the church and church fellowship. Thesis Five, Eight, Nine, and Eleven were the greatest offenders to confessional Lutheranism.⁶

³Armin W. Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference: Ecumenical Endeavor*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000), p288.

⁴Paul Naumann, *The significance of "A Statement of Forty-Four" in the history of the Missouri Synod*, (Essay File, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1979), p5.

⁵Curtis Jahn, "*A Statement of the Forty-four" the dam breaks loose in Missouri*, (Essay File, WLS, 1981), p7, quoted from the personal files of A.T. Kretzmann.

⁶Cf. Appendix for a copy of *A Statement* and its companion letter (copied from *Speaking the Truth in Love* and from WLQ).

The *Statement* hit the Missouri Synod with a splash of cold water. Even though these practices had already been advocated and even put into practice by individuals, no one was ready for "such a blatant, public attack made on the doctrine of church fellowship within the Missouri Synod by so many pastors and professors in prominent positions."⁷

The reaction was immediate! President Behnken received between two and three hundred protesting letters calling for decisive disciplinary action to be taken with the Forty-Four Signers.⁸ Missouri was definitely aware of its problems. Only four years earlier, Missouri's own theologians had addressed this issue very well:

To assume that prayer-fellowship will exist where doctrinal differences divide because one feels sure that certain doctrines are not church divisive is to make the error of the enthusiasts, who substitute personal feeling for God's revelation.

(It is not correct to speak of doctrines which are not church divisive. Once error appears one can never tell how far its ramifications go. Error in minor doctrine, even in an adiaphoron may be the symptom of a fundamental error. For example, the error of the Baptists in insisting on immersion is bound up with the much more serious error of denying that Baptism is a means of grace. Thus the former becomes church divisive.⁹)

But now the issue had escalated out of control. Behnken quickly chose a ten man committee to meet with ten of the Signers having the goal of rectifying the situation. The meeting of the Ten and Ten took place in Chicago on April 23rd and 24th, 1946. The President's committee had drawn up Thirteen Declarations in order to refute the twelve theses of the Forty-Four. Much of the meeting in Chicago was spent on Declaration II which was the antithesis of Thesis Five of *A Statement*. No agreement could ever be reached on this point (the discussion centered around an

⁷Jahn, *A Statement of the Forty-Four*, p7.

⁸Ibid., (quoted from Kretzmann's *Ten and Ten*).

⁹Paul E. Bente, *Statement on Prayer-Fellowship*, (Essay File, WLS, 1941 ?), p9.

exegesis of Romans 16:17) and the committee finally recommended that the President demand a retraction of *A Statement*.

President Behnken ignored the committee's recommendation and its request to publish its report. He had reached his own agreement with the "Statementarians" on January 6th, 1947. The agreement was that *A Statement* and its accompanying letter was to be withdrawn as a basis of discussion, although this was not to be interpreted as a retraction.¹⁰ Success! Confessional Lutheranism wins! No.

While the actions of the Forty-Four seemed to be an immediate failure, time has written a different chapter to this story. Behnken's solution was simply a quick fix that really fixed nothing. The doctrinal issues which had concentrated on fellowship hold sway in Missouri today . But the issue never **really** was about prayer fellowship. The real issue was church discipline.

The reason the principles advocated in *A Statement* did eventually win out in Missouri is probably due less to the effort of the statementarians than to the effort (or lack of effort) on the part of the synodical officials...if a church body's practice is allowed to be inconsistent with its doctrine, then eventually the doctrine will be made to conform to the practice.¹¹

¹⁰Jahn, *A Statement of the Forty-Four*, p14.

¹¹Naumann, *Signif. of A Statement*, p9,10.

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Kirchengeschichtliche Notizen

A Statement. — Under this title, and together with a rather significant accompanying letter, a group of Missouri Synod pastors and professors have sent out a pronouncement which was bound to cause extensive repercussions, particularly since it has subsequently been published rather widely. We recognize that the issues raised by this document constitute an internal problem of our sister synod, and shall not presume to say how they shall be settled, but because of the bearing of this document on the wider problem of Lutheran union, in which we also have a stake, we feel that we owe our readers an authentic copy of the text as well as a discussion of at least some of its implications. We shall try to keep this discussion as objective as possible.

E. R.

Letter and Statement

Dear Friend and Brother:

The enclosed Statement is being sent to you with the compliments of the forty-one pastors who adopted it by unanimous resolution and ordered it printed and mailed over their signatures to all pastors of Synod.

Naturally, we do not regard this Statement as a finished product or as the last word on the subjects under discussion. We do believe, how-

ever, that it goes to the root of some of the most vexing problems confronting our Synod. Moreover, it gives expression to our mature convictions — convictions which lie close to our hearts and have been thoroughly tried in the light of the Word and before the tribunal of our own consciences. In view of this, we urgently request you, dear Brother, to study this Statement carefully and objectively and to evaluate it by the criterion of the Holy Scriptures.

The meeting which culminated in the adoption of this Statement was held in Chicago on September 6 and 7. Concerning the nature of this meeting, the invitation said the following: "This will be nothing revolutionary or iconoclastic. On the contrary, our meeting is to be sane and soundly Lutheran, evangelical, positive and constructive."

The considerations which prompted the meeting and the purpose for which it was held were set forth in the following paragraphs of the invitation:

"In recent years, especially since the Saginaw Convention, a strange and pernicious spirit, utterly at variance with the fundamental concepts of the Gospel and the genius of the Lutheran Church, has lifted its ugly head in more than one area of our beloved Synod. This spirit has its origin in a wrong approach to the Holy Scriptures and in a tragic misconception of the very essence of the Gospel and the nature, functions and mission of the Church. It is characterized by barren, negative attitudes, unevangelical techniques in dealing with the problems of the individual and the Church, unsympathetic legalistic practices, a self-complacent and separatistic narrowness, and an utter disregard for the fundamental law of Christian love. One need not be a prophet to forecast what the results will be if this unevangelical and intolerant spirit is left unrestrained and to its own devices. Spiritual life will be blighted. The organism of the Church will be paralyzed. Ecclesiastical persecution will occur with increasing frequency. The onward march of the Gospel will be obstructed and one open door after another will be closed to us.

"During the past year this alarming phenomenon in our synodical life has been the topic of many discussions. In every case the conviction prevailed that it is our sacred obligation to do everything within our power to preserve our precious evangelical Lutheran heritage. But invariably the question arose, What can be done?

"Several groups in different parts of the country have arrived at the same answer: We must, to begin with, arrange a meeting of kindred minds to study the situation."

The meeting which resulted from this invitation was very gratifying. It was marked by spirited and thorough-going discussions, which showed that men in all parts of Synod had been giving much prayerful thought to the matters under consideration and that they were sure that the time had come to give utterance to their convictions as a contribution toward the preservation and propagation of the precious heritage of historic Lutheranism.

We shall gratefully receive any comment on this Statement, as well as requests for additional information regarding its substance and purpose. Please address your communications to the chairman of the Committee, E. J. Friedrich, Wheat Ridge, Colorado.

And now may the Lord bless the humble efforts which we are putting forth in His Holy Name.

Yours in the cause of Christ and His Kingdom.
September 20, 1945.

THE COMMITTEE.

✠ In Nomine Jesu ✠

✠

A STATEMENT

✠

We, the undersigned, as individuals, members of Synod, conscious of our responsibilities and duties before the Lord of the Church, herewith subscribe to the following statement:

ONE

We affirm our unswerving loyalty to the great evangelical heritage of historic Lutheranism. We believe in its message and mission for this crucial hour in the time of man.

We therefore deplore any and every tendency which would limit the power of our heritage, reduce it to narrow legalism, and confine it by man-made traditions.

TWO

We affirm our faith in the great Lutheran principle of the inerrancy, certainty, and all-sufficiency of Holy Writ.

We therefore deplore a tendency in our Synod to substitute human judgments, synodical resolutions, or other sources of authority for the supreme authority of Scripture.

THREE

We affirm our conviction that the Gospel must be given free course so that it may be preached in all its truth and power to all the nations of the earth.

We therefore deplore all man-made walls and barriers and all ecclesiastical traditions which would hinder the free course of the Gospel in the world.

FOUR

We believe that the ultimate and basic motive for all our life and work must be love—love of God, love of the Word, love of the brethren, love of souls.

We affirm our conviction that the law of love must also find application to our relationship to other Lutheran bodies.

We therefore deplore a loveless attitude which is manifesting itself within Synod. This unscriptural attitude has been expressed in suspicions of brethren, in the impugning of motives, and in the condemnation of all who have expressed differing opinions concerning some of the problems confronting our Church today.

FIVE

We affirm our conviction that sound exegetical procedure is the basis for sound Lutheran theology.

We therefore deplore the fact that Romans 16:17,18 has been applied to all Christians who differ from us in certain points of doctrine. It is our conviction, based on sound exegetical and hermeneutical principles, that this text does not apply to the present situation in the Lutheran Church of America.

We furthermore deplore the misuse of First Thessalonians 5:22 in the translation "avoid every appearance of evil." This text should be used only in its true meaning, "avoid evil in every form."

SIX

We affirm the historic Lutheran position concerning the central importance of the una sancta and the local congregation. We believe that there should be a re-emphasis of the privileges and responsibilities of the local congregation also in the matter of determining questions of fellowship.

We therefore deplore the new and improper emphasis on the synodical organization as basic in our consideration of the problems of the Church. We believe that no organizational loyalty can take the place of loyalty to Christ and His Church.

SEVEN

We affirm our abiding faith in the historic Lutheran position concerning the centrality of the Atonement and the Gospel as the revelation of God's redeeming love in Christ.

We therefore deplore any tendency which reduces the warmth and power of the Gospel to a set of intellectual propositions which are to be grasped solely by the mind of man.

EIGHT

We affirm our conviction that any two or more Christians may pray together to the Triune God in the name of Jesus Christ if the purpose for which they meet and pray is right according to the Word of God. This obviously includes meetings of groups called for the purpose of discussing doctrinal differences.

We therefore deplore the tendency to decide the question of prayer fellowship on any other basis beyond the clear words of Scripture.

NINE

We believe that the term "unionism" should be applied only to acts in which a clear and unmistakable denial of Scriptural truth or approval of error is involved.

We therefore deplore the tendency to apply this non-Biblical term to any and every contact between Christians of different denominations.

TEN

We affirm the historic Lutheran position that no Christian has a right to take offense at anything which God has commanded in His Holy Word. The plea of offense must not be made a cover for the irresponsible expression of prejudices, traditions, customs, and usages.

ELEVEN

We affirm our conviction that in keeping with the historic Lutheran tradition and in harmony with the Synodical resolution adopted in 1938 regarding Church fellowship, such fellowship is possible without complete agreement in details of doctrine and practice which have never been considered divisive in the Lutheran Church.

TWELVE

We affirm our conviction that our Lord has richly, singularly, and undeservedly blessed our beloved Synod during the first century of its existence in America. We pledge the efforts of our hearts and hands to the building of Synod as the second century opens and new opportunities are given us by the Lord of the Church.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠

In Witness Whereof, we, the undersigned, affix our signatures this seventh day of September in the year of our Lord 1945, at Chicago, Illinois.

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ACKER, LAWRENCE

AMLING, C. M.

ARNDT, W.

BARTELS, H.

BAUER, W. E.

BEHNKE, C. A.

BERNTHAL, AUG. F.

BOBZIN, AUG. F.

BRETSCHER, PAUL

BRUENING, WM. F.

BRUSTAT, A. W.

CAEMMERER, RICH. R.

COATES, THOMAS

DEFFNER, L. H.

ENGELBRECHT, H. H.

FRIEDRICH, E. J.

GEISEMAN, O. A.

GIESELER, C. A.

GLABE, E. B.

GRAEBNER, THEO.

HANSER, ARTHUR R.

HEMMETER, BERNARD H.

HEMMETER, H. B.

HILLMER, WM. H.

HOFFMANN, OSWALD

KRETZMANN, A. R.

KRETZMANN, KARL

KRETZMANN, O. P.

KUECHLE, GEO.

KUNTZ, WERNER

KURTH, ERWIN

KUMNICK, H. H.

LINDEMANN, FRED H.

LINDEMANN, HERBERT

LOOSE, F. W.

MEYER, ADOLF F.

MILLER, PAUL F.

POLACK, W. G.

SAUER, O. A.

SCHROEDEL, THEO. H.

THEISS, O. H.

WEBER, EDMUND W.

WENCHEL, J. FREDERIC

WIND, H. F.

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