

# Friendship or Fellowship

The 1872 Founding of the Synodical Conference & WELS-LCMS Discussions Today

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“It is always a sign of deep spiritual sickness when a church forgets its fathers.”<sup>1</sup> This year marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America in 1872. Though it has dissolved and remains a blip in our rearview mirrors, it was a truly ecumenical endeavor, created by the Spirit (Eph 4:3), and deserving of our attention today. Within the Synodical Conference we walked and worked hand in hand with the Missouri Synod and our current-sister synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. “By 1875, the new organization represented over 325,000 baptized American Lutherans”<sup>2</sup> and was the largest Lutheran organization in America. It was orthodox, confessional, and mission-minded! The 1961 break in fellowship with Missouri and the dissolution of the Synodical Conference was the moment that defined a generation of WELS pastors—but that’s another paper.

The purpose of this paper is to review the history and impact of the 1872 formation of the Synodical Conference. That necessitates an overview of the years leading up to the first official meeting and the church bodies involved. It is surprising how quickly it all came together and how fundamental unity – not absolute and perfect unity – marked the confessional fellowship. Next, our study will discuss the theological legacy of the Synodical Conference, a theology which we still confess and cherish today. In the final section of the paper, we will discuss the current state of LCMS-WELS-ELS discussions and the differences that still divide us. Christians long to see and experience the unity for which our Savior prayed in John 17:20-21, *I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*<sup>3</sup> “No individual Christian, no congregation nor synod, can be satisfied to spin a cocoon about himself and let the rest of the Christian world pass by. Christians are not separatists.”<sup>4</sup>

Much of this paper will deal with the doctrine of church fellowship. With joy we recognize the Christian faith created by the Holy Spirit and we seek to confess that faith with others, “walking together in the truth” (2 John 4). The practice of this doctrine is not always easy. For example, what level of agreement is needed for church fellowship? According to the Scriptures and this historical study, fundamental agreement is needed for church fellowship—but it’s not perfect or absolute agreement. The exercise of fellowship also includes two principles that seem to present some tension. These two principles govern us in the matter of the outward expression of church fellowship: “[1] the great debt of love which the Lord would have us pay to the weak brother, and [2] His clear injunction (also flowing out of love) to avoid those who adhere to false doctrine and practice and all who make themselves partakers of their evil deeds.”<sup>5</sup> Knowing how and when to evangelically apply these two principles is one of the most difficult problems in pastoral theology. When is someone a weak brother? When is someone a persistent errorist? Spoiler alert: synodical membership should not be the lone litmus test. As we shall see in this paper, God willing, the formation and theology of the Synodical Conference bears this out beautifully. This paper is not about hero worship or getting back to the good old days. This is an opportunity to do some “deep

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann Sasse, “Fathers of the Church” in *The Lonely Way*, CPH 2002, p.223. Quoted by Matthew Harrison, “Introduction to the 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* (Spring 2022) vol.95, No.1, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Granquist, *Lutherans in America: A New History*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 189.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Biblical quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

<sup>4</sup> Armin Schuetze. “Foreword—1972 Lessons from the Past,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 69, no.1 (January 1972), 4.

<sup>5</sup> *WELS Doctrinal Statements*, “Theses on Church Fellowship,” Commission on Inter-Church Relations, 1997, 34.

work”<sup>6</sup> in the discipline of historical theology and to see how the Scriptures were applied and lived. *Theologia est habitus practicus* – “theology is a practical aptitude” and the Spirit teaches this aptitude often in the school of experience. “We cannot relive the past. We do not want to relive the past. But we can learn from the past as we live in the present and look to the future.”<sup>7</sup>

## Part 1: MOVEMENTS TOWARD TRUE UNION

The Synodical Conference was not the first large scale federation of Lutherans in America. In 1820 the General Synod had been founded, uniting most Lutherans in the Eastern United States, such as the Pennsylvania Ministerium, the New York Ministerium, the Melancthon Synod, the Franckean Synod, and many more. By 1860 the General Synod comprised two-thirds of all Lutherans in the US.<sup>8</sup> In 1863 due in part to the Civil War, the General Synod congregations in the south broke away, and the General Synod South was formed, later to be called “The United Synod, South.”<sup>9</sup> Its loose theology and practice were identical with that of the General Synod, despite initial hopes for a better Lutheranism.<sup>10</sup> Since its founding in 1860 the Minnesota Synod had been part of the General Synod, and the Wisconsin Synod had some ties through our first President Johannes Muehlhauser and the Pennsylvania Ministerium.

It almost goes without saying that the Missouri Synod was vehemently opposed to the General Synod and all those who took a lax view toward the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. They often took aim at the Wisconsin Synod.<sup>11</sup> In 1865 the Missouri Synod wrote in their church newspaper, *Der Lutheraner*: “In the foreword [of the *Gemeinde-Blatt*, Wisconsin’s new ‘parish paper’] we read: We do not intend “to depart one iota” from the Word of God and the confession of our fathers. That is a fine, very praiseworthy promise. But how does the practice of the Wisconsin Synod agree with this promise, when, e.g., it obtains its preachers from unionistic institutions and supplies its Lutheran congregations with such unionistic people? Will such unionistic preachers also not “depart one iota” from the confession “of our fathers”? All sorts [of preachers] now want to be Lutheran, but the mere outward avowal doesn’t do it. Lutherans are honest people.”<sup>12</sup> The Missouri Synod was no fan of Wisconsin.

Some within the General Synod wanted a firmer Lutheran confession. In 1866 the Pennsylvania Ministerium under the leadership of conservative theologian Charles Porterfield Krauth proposed a new organization, the General Council (or “Church Council” as it was initially called by some). Thirteen bodies responded favorably to the invitation including the Norwegian, Iowa, Minnesota,

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<sup>6</sup> Defined by Cal Newport as “professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate.” “Deep work” is the opposite of “frenetic shallowness.” See Cal Newport, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* (New York: Grand Central, 2016), 5. Special thanks for putting me onto this resource goes to Pastor Jonathan Bauer and his paper, “Our Lutheran Moment: Why Now Is a Good Time for Us to Be Doing What We Do Best,” delivered to the WELS South Atlantic District Convention, June 7-9, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Schuetze, “Foreword—1972,” 10.

<sup>8</sup> Schuetze, “Foreword—1972,” 4.

<sup>9</sup> E. Clifford Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 247.

<sup>10</sup> The General Synod—South rejected the “Definite Synodical Platform” of Samuel Simon Schmucker and held to the doctrines of the Augsburg Confession. They did, however, allow “the full and free exercise of private judgment” in regard to disputed articles of the AC (cf. Nelson, 245-246).

<sup>11</sup> For many examples, see J.P. Koehler’s *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (St. Cloud, MN: The Protestant Conference, 1970), in the section, “Increased Friction with Missouri” (p.79-86).

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference*, 38.

Ohio, Missouri, and Wisconsin Synods. The initial optimism, however, was short lived. The first planning meeting was made up of Lutherans, who claimed fealty to the whole Book of Concord, but whose practice was less than consistent. "It prided itself, so our fathers said, in having a good confession on paper, but it failed to follow through in action."<sup>13</sup> C.F.W. Walther wrote at the time, "If a truly Lutheran general synod is to emerge, in our humble opinion, this cannot happen by simply uniting all synods in an ecclesiastical hierarchy, in whose constitution the unaltered Augsburg Confession or even the entire Book of Concord is formally recognized as its doctrinal basis next to the Word of God. The enemies of the true Lutheran Church are not only those who believe they can find errors in the confessions. They also include all those who harbor certain errors, yet believe they can honestly subscribe to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and the whole Book of Concord."<sup>14</sup> By the 1867 constituting convention of the General Council lines were already forming. The Missouri and Norwegian Synods were not present, and the Ohio Synod withdrew after the convention. The Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan Synods did join the General Council, though their time would be short lived.

The 1867 Wisconsin Synod Convention had heard a report on the General Council from Synod President Streissguth and President Martin of Northwestern, who had attended the initial 1866 planning meeting. Wisconsin's communicant membership of 12,741 made it the second largest member of the proposed organization, surpassed only by the Pennsylvania Ministerium's 50,000 members. Three pastors were chosen to attend the General Council's first official convention: newly re-elected Pres. Bading, Pres. Martin, and Senior Muehlhauser. The elder statesman Muehlhauser was unable to fulfill his duty, however. The Lord saw fit to call him home to heaven on September 15, 1867. This proved to be a blessed change because the pastor who replaced him was Adolf Hoenecke, whose theological acumen was needed.

The General Council meeting in Fort Wayne in November 1867 proved disappointing due to basic questions of doctrine and practice, often referred to as "The Four Points." The representatives from Ohio and Iowa asked for specific answers to four questions: 1) Millennialism – false views about the 1000 year reign of Christ, 2) Pulpit Fellowship – sharing Lutheran pulpits with pastors who were not Lutheran, 3) Altar Fellowship – admitting to Holy Communion those who were not Lutheran, and 4) Lodge Membership/Secret Societies – allowing Lutherans to join anti-Christian societies. When vague and non-committal answers were given to these questions, Bading, Hoenecke, and Martin, along with the Minnesota Synod's Pres. Heyer, had their protests recorded in the minutes.<sup>15</sup> Bading stated that he would have to report the situation to the next Wisconsin Synod convention. The writing was on the wall.

Other developments at the Wisconsin Synod Convention in 1867 would also prove noteworthy. The Iowa Synod<sup>16</sup> sent a group of leaders and relations were very cordial. It seems that Bading and Prof. Martin were in favor of closer relations with Iowa. Professor Sigmund Fritschel (1833-1900), an opponent at the time of Missouri, was invited to preach for one of the convention services. The Iowa delegation was even given the floor to make their case for "open questions," i.e. non-fundamental

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<sup>13</sup> Armin Schuetze. "Foreword—1972 Lessons from the Past," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 69, no.1 (January 1972), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Walther quoted in Prange, *Wielding the Sword of the Spirit Volume 2*, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Fredrich, *Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 42.

<sup>16</sup> These were Lutherans who subscribed to the whole Book of Concord, many of whom had come from Germany under the direction of Wilhelm Loehe. The core group of pastors had originally served in Michigan, but after tensions between Walther and Loehe caused a rift, they moved to the mission field of Iowa. See Prange, *Vol. 1*, p.179-228. They also advocated "doctrinal development" for certain "open questions" not definitively confessed in the Book of Concord; see Prange, *Vol. 2*, 51ff.

doctrines on which Lutherans could disagree and remain in fellowship (e.g., Sunday observance, chiliasm, the Antichrist, etc.). This was also somewhat related to their view of the Lutheran Confessions as mainly historical documents. Although some in Wisconsin expressed agreement with the Iowa position, many others did not.<sup>17</sup> Hoenecke acknowledged that we must be patient with weak brothers, but Iowa's position was "a door through which enemies of the truth could gain entry into our Lutheran Zion, enemies who would then be difficult to overcome."<sup>18</sup>

This issue of "open questions" turned out to be the issue separating Wisconsin and Iowa. Iowa also believed that the doctrines not explicitly expounded in the Confessions were not binding on Lutherans. Similar events transpired later in 1867 when Iowa and Missouri met in a colloquy in Milwaukee; it seemed that doctrinal agreement might exist and there was hope for a resolution to some bitter of the disagreements originating in the 1850s. Unity between Missouri and Iowa did not materialize, however. The two synods held different doctrinal views as became clear from the discussions on "open questions." Walther stated, "Nothing whatsoever that God clearly revealed may be called an *open question*. But it is an altogether different question how I must deal with an erring person, lest he sink deeper into error and Satan devour him. I would not jump at the conclusion that a man must be a heretic even though he err in the important article concerning the Trinity, let alone if he erred in a lesser point. Only one who teaches in such a way that he attacks the personal foundation (Christ himself) or the dogmatic foundation (the sum total of all fundamental articles) or the organic foundation (the Scriptures), and in spite of repeated admonition insists that he will not give up his error—only such a one I will condemn as a heretic but not one who does not attack the foundation, in other words, not any one who may err in some other point, but is willing to receive instruction. I am convinced that in this life we cannot attain more than a fundamental unity."<sup>19</sup> Walther (and Wisconsin) were not saying that there are certain fundamentals that we must agree on and certain non-fundamentals that we can disagree about and still have church fellowship. That would be a sinful abuse of the Word. They were rejecting Iowa's teaching about "open questions" because, as Iowa saw it, we all have weaknesses in faith, and this should not be divisive of church fellowship. Walther made the point that weaknesses are not an excuse for rejecting a clear Word of God. It is true that we will never all understand everything perfectly, but that is something far different from Iowa's teaching on "open questions." More on the proper understanding of "fundamental unity" will be discussed later.<sup>20</sup>

The next Wisconsin Synod convention in Racine in 1868 turned out to be the most important thus far in our history. The delegates made three important decisions: fellowship with Missouri, breaking with the mission houses, and leaving the General Council. The Wisconsin-Missouri relations improved thanks to brother-to-brother discussions. Pres. Bading included in his official report that "opportune private discussions with pastors of the Missouri Synod, who desire peace as earnestly with us as we with them, justify the hope that also our relations to that church body will become more and more friendly and brotherly."<sup>21</sup> Wisconsin and Missouri Synod pastors in the Watertown area (Bading and Hoenecke among them) and also among pastors in the Hustisford area (Philipp Koehler) had come to acknowledge each other's orthodox confession. The Racine

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<sup>17</sup> Brenner, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Holtan, "Walther's Theses on Open Questions—In the Light of Holy Scripture," in *C.F.W. Walther: Churchman and Theologian*, (St. Louis: CPH, 2011), 64.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in J.P. Meyer, "Unionism," *Essays in Church Fellowship*, (Milwaukee: NPH, 1996), p.63-64.

<sup>20</sup> See "Part 2: Doctrinal Legacy" for more discussion on the fellowship applications.

<sup>21</sup> *Wisconsin Proceedings*, 1868, p.9. Quoted in E.C. Fredrich, "A Few, Faithful in Few Things: Our Synod's Fathers and the Formation of the Synodical Conference," found in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 69, no.3 (July 1972), 155.

convention declared that they knew of no “church divisive differences” keeping Wisconsin and Missouri apart and that conflicts involved “practical questions, aggressions of individual members of both synods and articles in public periodicals, which often expressed more the tone of strife and scorn than sincere regret over such evils and loving correction.” (Professor Hoenecke was one of those protesting the phrase “church-divisive differences” because all “differences in doctrine” were church divisive and there were not some “open questions” in doctrines that were not “church divisive.”<sup>22</sup>)

On this basis the 1868 convention also instructed Bading to take the “proper steps to bring about peace so that there might be mutual recognition as Lutheran synods and brotherly relations between members of both synods in the spirit of truth on the basis of pure doctrine.”<sup>23</sup> Pres. Bading was able to present the resolutions to the Missouri’s Northern District, which opened their convention on the day the Racine convention closed. Walther was in attendance at that meeting and urged the convention to act, not just as a district, but on behalf of the whole Missouri Synod. A colloquy was scheduled and on October 21-22 representatives met in Milwaukee. Wisconsin representatives yielded to the Missourian demand that doctrinal matters receive the prime attention, even though they felt that “Wisconsin’s orthodoxy had been sufficiently demonstrated.”<sup>24</sup> The two sides discussed “open questions” and examined Walther’s writing from earlier that year, “The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions.”<sup>25</sup> On that basis, theses were composed and church fellowship relations were officially declared. As Thesis V states, “The Church militant must indeed aim at and strive for complete unity of faith and doctrine, but it never will attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one.”<sup>26</sup> Walther concluded the colloquy by reportedly saying: “Brethren, if we had known before what we know now we might have declared our unity of faith ten years ago.”<sup>27</sup> Walther also included the following judgment in his November 1 issue of *Der Lutheraner*, “We must admit that all our suspicions against the dear Wisconsin Synod have not merely disappeared but were also made ashamed. God be thanked for his unspeakable gift!”<sup>28</sup>

The other two noteworthy actions of 1868, which helped solidify Wisconsin’s doctrinal position, were the official breaking of ties with the German mission houses and the decision to leave the General Council over the “four points” as outlined previously.<sup>29</sup> The break with the mission houses was especially meaningful and had been brewing for some time. President Bading had spent 18 months in Germany and Russia from 1863-64 raising funds for the new seminary in Watertown. He and other leaders had justified this trip because there were many faithful Lutherans remaining in the State church system, and the Wisconsin Synod could receive support from them in good conscience.<sup>30</sup> Things were not going well, however, as the leadership in the mission houses

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 51.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 52.

<sup>25</sup> See C.F.W. Walther, *Walther’s Works: Church Fellowship*, (St. Louis: CPH, 2015), 95-140. This is one of the most significant essays in the history of Lutheran church fellowship discussions. LCMS President J.A.O Preus had it reprinted for the 1971 LCMS Convention in Milwaukee. Old lessons needed to be relearned!

<sup>26</sup> See Appendix A. The 12 Theses are part of our WELS Doctrinal Statement on Church Fellowship.

<sup>27</sup> Koehler, *History*, 74. Koehler said that Walther was prone to “impulsive statements of regard and affection.” See also Koehler’s summary of the Colloquy on pp.128-130.

<sup>28</sup> Holtan, “Walther’s Theses on Open Questions,” 66-67. See also Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 52

<sup>29</sup> Fredrich, *Wisconsin Synod*, 43.

<sup>30</sup> Adolf Hoenecke, who arrived from Germany and joined the Wisconsin Synod in 1863, was one who steered our leaders away from this false idea. He wrote in his *Dogmatics*, “The defenders of the Prussian Union allege that there can still be confessional adherence in a unionistic fellowship, and thus unionism is not

espoused a more lax Lutheran practice by attempting to force Wisconsin pastors to serve Reformed Christians. The Wisconsin Synod could not and would not go along with this. Therefore, the money remained in Germany, never making its way to America. In the end, the German societies also severed relations once they learned of Wisconsin's confessional stand and their closer ties with Missouri.<sup>31</sup>

During the 1869 conventions of Missouri and Wisconsin, a plan was adopted for Missouri Synod men to attend Northwestern University and the Wisconsin men to attend the St. Louis Seminary. This joint work would be an important part of the future Synodical Conference. One can imagine a high level of excitement over these developments, but "in his 1869 presidential address, Bading tried to caution the synodical delegates from thinking that fellowship with the Missouri Synod would prove to be a great panacea. God's kingdom would never be advanced through outward church union. "God's pure Word alone and our acceptance of that Word must be our rule and curb, if our undertakings and discussions should be blessed and directed by our Lord and our synod made secure in its position and growth.""<sup>32</sup>

The fall of 1869 also saw church fellowship relations declared between Wisconsin and the young Minnesota Synod (founded in 1860). The recent move of Pastor John H. Sieker from Granville, Wisconsin, to Trinity congregation in St. Paul and his election as Minnesota Synod president certainly aided in the process.<sup>33</sup> Missouri and Minnesota would declare full fellowship in April 1872 and even dispensed with a formal doctrinal colloquy because the unity of the Spirit was present.<sup>34</sup>

The other three founding synods of the Synodical Conference were the Illinois Synod, the Norwegian Synod, and the Ohio Synod. Each has its own history and background, but in the late 1860s all three had drawn closer to Missouri and declared full fellowship with the Missouri Synod by 1872.<sup>35</sup> The Norwegian Synod, founded in 1853, had created close ties with Missouri through an agreement in 1857 to send their students to the St. Louis Seminary.<sup>36</sup> Wisconsin, meanwhile, had her doubts about the orthodox nature of the Illinois Synod and instructed delegates "to obtain more exact information about their confessional position and practice"<sup>37</sup> before giving their hearty approval to the acceptance of Illinois to the Synodical Conference. Missouri too had certain reservations about Illinois, as demonstrated by their Synod Convention in Spring 1872. The Missouri Synod extended the hand of fellowship to Illinois "in spite of all still existing weakness and shortcoming in its congregations and in individual pastors."<sup>38</sup> Wisconsin also had no formal contact

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synonymous with indifferentism. But that is a total delusion, as also experience sufficiently testifies that with the Union, door and gate were thrown open to indifferentism. And how could it be otherwise? The presupposition of all union is that the truth of Scripture, particularly insofar as it condemns all error, even the least error, and warns against it as poison for the soul, was not seriously asserted. As soon as this happens within the union, the truth of Scripture is at an end." (*Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Vol. 4 Milwaukee: NPH, 1999, p.416). Quoted by Jeffrey Holtan, "Walther's Theses on Open Questions—In the Light of Holy Scripture," in *C.F.W. Walther: Churchman and Theologian*, (St. Louis: CPH, 2011), 55-56.

<sup>31</sup> See Prange, vol. 2, 118-135, section titled: "Confessional Showdown Pressing Toward a Final Resolution."

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 160. Quote from *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings*, 1869, found in *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 22, no. 1 (April 2004), 6.

<sup>33</sup> Schuetze, *Ecumenical Endeavor*, 43-44.

<sup>34</sup> Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 54.

<sup>35</sup> See Schuetze, 45-50.

<sup>36</sup> Brenner, 14. See also E. Clifford Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 249.

<sup>37</sup> Fredrich, "A Few, Faithful in Few Things," 163.

<sup>38</sup> Fredrich, "A Few, Faithful in Few Things," 164. Quoting *Missouri Proceedings*, 1872, pp.95-96.

with the Ohio Synod.<sup>39</sup> All these interactions demonstrated that fellowship among the synods was not a perfect or absolute unity, but what Missouri and Wisconsin had confessed earlier in 1868. Their fellowship was a fundamental unity, reflecting a common confession and approach to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Thus, the stage was set for the formation of the Synodical Conference in July 1872.

### ***EXCURSUS: [Re-]Framing Our History***

Most WELS pastors are familiar with the traditional narrative about our history, namely, that we started out lax in our Lutheran doctrine and practice, but by God's grace we grew in our confessional approach and stand through men like Adolf Hoenecke and John Bading. This is Wisconsin's so called "turn to the right"<sup>40</sup> as popularized by Prof. Fredrich and generally accepted among us. This view has historical support. Some pastors in the mid-1860s protested and claimed that the Wisconsin Synod had changed from her original position. For example, upon breaking away from the mission societies and leaving the General Council in 1868, two pastors protested and resigned, as did President Martin of Northwestern. Apparently, the Wisconsin Synod "was now requiring more Lutheranism than it had" when these pastors first joined.<sup>41</sup>

According to Peter Prange, however, this "turn to the right" is somewhat debatable. "In stark contrast to that assumption, [J.P.] Koehler insisted that the stand Bading took toward the confessions as synod president beginning in 1860 was no different from the one he and the majority of Langenburg, Barmen, and Berlin missionaries had brought with them when they first arrived in Wisconsin in 1850."<sup>42</sup> The majority of mission pastors sent to the Wisconsin Synod had Lutheran roots, but they would need to learn how to apply authentic Lutheranism in an American context. The pastors were serving rural and frontier congregations in the 1850s-60s and were faced with challenges many of us can't even imagine.<sup>43</sup> Chief among these were German people who had immigrated to the United States and been accustomed to union congregations. Reformed and Lutheran Christians saw nothing wrong with such mixing, and Wisconsin Synod pastors had to organize groups into truly Lutheran congregations. The pastors, though trained in German mission houses, came to learn things were different in America.

There were issues in doctrine and practice, but it was not the drastic overhaul we sometimes imagine. J.P. Koehler wrote, "The Wisconsin Synod from the start stood for Lutheranism. Where the practice of the body was at variance with that confession, it must be charged to the personal stand of individual members, to the lack of clear judgment in individual cases in a new field, to the personal and in many a way not clarified relations with the German societies, and to the missionary zeal that was blind to everything but the ingathering of souls. That the determined Lutheran minds in the body did not assert themselves more effectively and establish more quickly its Lutheran character must be laid to the looseness of the organization, the various antecedents of the men, and their greater concentration on mission work... The name of 'unionistic synod', of course, was resented by the Wisconsin men as slanderous."<sup>44</sup> Many of these attacks came from Missouri Synod publications and pastors. The Wisconsin Synod had little interest or ability in responding to all this, but things started to change in 1865 when the Synod began publishing their own newspaper, the

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<sup>39</sup> Koehler, *History*, 142.

<sup>40</sup> See Edward Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, (Milwaukee: NPH, 1992), 27-36.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 43.

<sup>42</sup> Prange, vol. 2, 92.

<sup>43</sup> See some recent articles in the *WELS Historical Institute Journal* about Johannes Strieter, a Missouri mission pastor in the Wausau during the 1850s-70s, for some entertaining reading.

<sup>44</sup> Koehler, *History*, 80.



*Gemeinde-Blatt* ("Parish Paper"). This gave the Synod a growing confessional voice, something we did not have clearly beforehand. Seminary Prof. Moldenke served as editor-in-chief and Adolf Hoenecke and John Bading as assistant editors.<sup>45</sup> The Wisconsin Synod could now present the treasures of Lutheran doctrine and practice in a meaningful way and also respond to critics.

Often the early Wisconsin Synod pastors are castigated as "unionists," and the Missouri Synod receives credit for Wisconsin's growing confessional firmness. This is not necessarily the case. Wisconsin was a Lutheran Synod and grew in her appreciation for Lutheran doctrine and practice, often in spite of Missouri's polemics against her. The publications of Missouri certainly presented Lutheranism well, and this "helped to bring the Wisconsin Synod congregations into the Missouri orbit."<sup>46</sup> When it came to the German missionary societies, "the sword-wielding of Walther and the Missourians was clearly making a difference and driving the Wisconsin Synod toward an inevitable showdown with its German sponsors."<sup>47</sup> And for that we give thanks. Yet, as Brenner notes, "Rather than being strongly influenced by Walther, the Wisconsin Synod men were recognizing more and more that they were in agreement with Walther's position."<sup>48</sup> To this author, it's hard to imagine a truly unionistic synod suddenly being embraced warmly by the Missouri Synod and being a founding member of the Synodical Conference by 1872, if things were as bad as Missouri publications made them out to be. We must be careful when studying history that we don't act like a drunk man leaning on a light post—i.e. doing it more for support than illumination. But it's safe to say that by God's grace and the work of the Spirit, there were good Lutherans in Wisconsin.

### ***THE SYNODICAL CONFERENCE COMES TOGETHER***

The initial impulses for a new confessional organization did not come from the Missouri Synod but from the Ohio Synod. This is somewhat surprising because there had been a rocky relationship between the two synods. In the 1850s Walther had organized free-conferences and many Ohioans participated, but talks "had quickly dissolved over the issue of secret societies and synodical rivalry."<sup>49</sup> Things began to improve during the 1860s, as some eastern Lutherans (Ohio included) came to a firmer Lutheran conviction. Some pastors of the Ohio Synod, meanwhile, also departed for the General Synod or the General Council. There was hope for union, but Walther did not mince words when it came to errors in the Ohio Synod, particularly their hierarchical tendencies in the doctrines of church and ministry. Walther wrote, "An open war is better than a false peace."<sup>50</sup> This led to some resentment on the part of Ohio Synod pastors, much like what happened with Wisconsin Synod men. But in an even deeper way, Missouri brought Ohio to a firmer confession of the truth. Ohio leaders like Professor Matthias Loy and William Lehmann publicly acknowledged the positive influence of the Missouri Synod through their publications and through knowing leaders personally.<sup>51</sup> The Ohio Synod, especially Pres. Loy, had a burning desire for mission work among the English and he saw many blessings in a Missouri-Ohio partnership.

A colloquy meeting in 1868 between Missouri and Ohio seemed to provide initial hope, but Ohio was not united in its public confession on the doctrine of the ministry. The 1869 Missouri Synod

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<sup>45</sup> 1865 *Proceedings*, translation in *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, vol. 15 #1 (April 1997), p 15.

<sup>46</sup> Koehler, *History*, 153.

<sup>47</sup> Prange, vol. 2, 130.

<sup>48</sup> Brenner, 13.

<sup>49</sup> Prange, vol. 2, 166.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>51</sup> See Prange, vol. 2, 171-175, for examples of Loy's and Lehmann's public thanks for Missouri's influence.

convention declared, "It would be unionistical to enter into synodical union with another synod which is not professedly of the same faith and doctrine in all essential points."<sup>52</sup> In 1870 the Ohio Synod produced a clear doctrinal statement on the doctrine of the ministry. Their president, Professor Loy, also recommended to his synod "that steps be taken towards effecting a proper understanding between the Synods of Missouri, of Wisconsin, of Illinois, and our own Synod, which all occupy substantially the same position, and arranging a plan of cooperation in the work of the Lord."<sup>53</sup> The Norwegians were also included in this invitation. The excitement over this proposed merger was apparent from the way these synods responded. Within months they came together in Chicago for the first planning meeting of the Synodical Conference on January 11-13, 1871.

The list of attendees reads like a "Who's Who" of confessional Lutherans fathers. Synod presidents, district presidents, professors: Walther, Schwan, Loeber, Loy, Schmidt, Bading, Hoenecke, Ernst, Adelberg, Preus, Ottesen, Rasmussen, and more. Two decisions were made: a constitution was drafted and a proposal adopted for a single, joint Lutheran seminary. The delegates also agreed to meet again the same year on November 14-16 in Fort Wayne, a more centrally located place. All pastors and teachers from the respective synods were invited.

In November 1871 a total of 67 pastors and professors, two congregational delegates, and nine teachers gathered in Indiana. Representatives from the Minnesota and Illinois Synods officially joined the proceedings, both synods having just left the General Council. This November meeting carefully reviewed the draft constitution and minor changes were made. The majority of the time, however, was spent reviewing line by line a paper prepared by Professor F.A. Schmidt<sup>54</sup> of the Norwegian Synod. The title explains its purpose: "Memorandum containing a detailed explanation of the reasons why the Synods that are uniting into the Synodical Conference of the Ev. Lutheran Church of North American were unable to join one of the already existing so-called Lutheran associations of synods in our country."<sup>55</sup> This document is often referred to by its German title, *Denkschrift*. It summarized the reasons why the synods could not join one of the three existing Lutheran church bodies in America. The General Synod, the General Synod South, and the General Council were all weighed and found wanting. The signatures of sixty-three pastors and professors were affixed to this document and the stage was set for the Synodical Conference to meet on the second Wednesday of July 1872.

The first official convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America was held on July 10-16, 1872, at Bading's St. John's Church in Milwaukee. The six founding synods were the Illinois, Missouri, Norwegian, Ohio, Minnesota, and Wisconsin Synods (Michigan joined in 1888 after finally leaving the General Council) and their overall size varied immensely. Wisconsin at the time had only 59 pastors and the Minnesota Synod, 25. In contrast, the Missouri Synod had a total of 415 pastors and professors at the time.<sup>56</sup> The first convention saw a total of 136 pastors, professors,

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>53</sup> Brenner, 15.

<sup>54</sup> Friedrich August Schmidt (1837-1928) is one of the most tragic figures in American Lutheranism. He immigrated to America as a child, was confirmed by Walther as a youngster, and studied under him at St. Louis. He was an astute theologian and a language dynamo who learned Norwegian and became a professor at their college/seminary in Decorah, Iowa. In 1872 he was called as the Norwegian Seminary professor in St. Louis, and it was from that position that he bumped heads with Walther over the doctrine of election. This conflict of men once so closely united would explode in the Election Controversy (*Gnadenwahlstreit*) and lead to a rift between the Norwegians and the rest of the Synodical Conference. The fallout from the Election Controversy is responsible for much of the division that exists among Lutherans in America today.

<sup>55</sup> Schuetze, *Ecumenical Endeavor*, 53-54.

<sup>56</sup> Fredrich, "A Few, Faithful in a Few Things," 155.

teachers, and laymen assembled, and of these 60 were designated “voting delegates.”<sup>57</sup> Professor Walther preached the opening sermon based on 1 Timothy 4:16, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” Walther opened the sermon by pointing out how just a few years ago the representatives of each synod “even fought against each other as enemies.” But things had changed. “Today... they glorify God with one mind and one mouth... as members of one household of faith, as sons of one Church, and as cherishers of one cause in brotherly harmony.” Walther also pointed out that “we do not regret the fight... for it was the only proper and blessed means of true peace, which now is granted us.”<sup>58</sup> Walther’s theme for the sermon was: “How important it is that we make the salvation of souls above all things the chief object of our joint labor in the kingdom of Christ.”<sup>59</sup> It was a “blessed and holy day” and Walther took the opportunity to encourage the assembly to give attention to themselves, to give attention to pure doctrine, and to continue in these things, not growing weary. Toward the end of the sermon, he addressed what awaits the Church as she opposed “all the currents of our time, inside and outside the Church... Not peace and rest, but conflict and strife; not honor and praise, but disgrace and abuse await us on every side.”<sup>60</sup> Yet, their chief goal together remains to lead souls to Christ and keep souls with Christ, and so save some.

The first order of business focused on electing officers. Professor C.F.W. Walther was elected as president,<sup>61</sup> Professor William F. Lehmann (Ohio Synod) as vice president, Pastor P. Beyer (Missouri Synod) as secretary, and layman J. Schmidt (Ohio Synod) as treasurer. Next delegates unanimously reported that their respective synods had adopted the constitution. The Synodical Conference was not established as a mega-church, since according to Article IV, “The Synodical Conference is merely an advisor body in all matters”<sup>62</sup> except where the various synods have conferred authority. But it did have the following purpose as laid out in the Constitution: “III. Object and Aim—External manifestation of the unity of the Spirit in the respective Synods; Mutual strengthening in faith and confession; Promotion of harmony in doctrine and practice, and removal of discords which arise or threaten to arise; Activity in common for common ends; Endeavors to fix the boundaries of Synods according to territorial limits, except where the language separates; Union of all Lutheran Synods in America in one orthodox American Lutheran Church.”<sup>63</sup> The idea was that the synods would grow closer to one another through mixed pastoral conferences and a natural “state-synod” system would develop. That aim proved to be a fading dream as the question of synodical structure proved too fraught with practical issues and personal preference to gain steam,<sup>64</sup> but the goal was to eliminate rivalry, discord, and foster wise stewardship for the sake of the gospel and the salvation of souls. The aim was right and the Conference at the time was united.

The bulk of the convention was occupied with two essays. The first was a practical essay by Professor Matthias Loy of Ohio entitled, “What is our responsibility toward the English-speaking People of Our Country?” The second was an essay by the new Norwegian Professor F.A. Schmidt,

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<sup>57</sup> Schuetze, *Ecumenical Endeavor*, 58.

<sup>58</sup> C.F.W. Walther, “On Pure Doctrine for the Salvation of Souls: Opening Sermon for the Synodical Conference,” in Matthew Harrison, *At Home in the House of My Fathers*, (St. Louis: CPH, 2011), 194-195.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>61</sup> Walther only served as president for one year, until 1873 when Lehmann was elected president. It would be 1927 before another Missourian was elected president of the Synodical Conference.

<sup>62</sup> *The Lutheran Standard*, Mathias Loy, ed. (Columbus, OH), “Memorial” in (May 15, 1872), Vol. XXX, no. 10, 73.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> See Prange’s extensive treatment in “The Elusive Lutheran Zion,” Vol.2, 227-262; also Schuetze, “The Question of Synodical Structure,” 77-90.

called to the St. Louis Seminary as part of the plan to merge all Seminaries of the Synodical Conference. His essay occupied seven sessions (more than half of the overall convention<sup>65</sup>) and was labelled “The Doctrine of Justification”; it treats both objective and subjective justification in great detail. Walther’s note about the publication of the proceedings in the September 1, 1872, edition of *Der Lutheraner* made specific mention of Schmidt’s treatment of justification. “The essay on this doctrine, dear to the hearts of all, is not the dry, learned theological type, but practical, fully satisfying anyone seeking food for his soul.”<sup>66</sup> More to come on these two essays in the next section.

## Part 2: THE DOCTRINAL LEGACY

The Synodical Conference is a now defunct institution. The legacy that remains is found in her children’s children and all those who value her Lutheran doctrine and practice. The days leading up to the founding and the inaugural Synodical Conference convention provide the backdrop for this portion of our study. In this section we will consider the doctrine of justification, the place of mission work, and the practice of church fellowship. Each of these held a vibrant place in the history we’ve treated so far. Our Lutheran fathers made clear: “Doctrinal integrity and mission work must go hand in hand.”<sup>67</sup>

### *Justification – Objective and Subjective*

F.A. Schmidt’s essay on the doctrine of justification was the central focus of the inaugural convention. His writing filled 48 pages of convention proceedings.<sup>68</sup> There were twelve theses explaining justification and its importance in the life of the Church. The first three theses emphasized this doctrine as the *Kern und Stern*, “the kernel and star” of all doctrines. This is the teaching on which the Church stands or falls (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*). “When we speak of Justification, we speak of the Christian religion, for the doctrine of Christianity is none other than the revelation of God concerning the manner in which men are justified and saved through the redemption of Christ.”<sup>69</sup> We must oppose the unionism of our age, “which leads people to believe that in the doctrine of Justification, we are of one accord with Methodists, Presbyterians, etc., though not in the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper and the Person of Christ. We are obliged to repeat that not a shadow of the pure doctrine of Justification is found in their peculiar systems.” Certain things might sound the same, but the sects point man to his repentance, his struggling, his holiness, and it’s clear they want to save a man by his own efforts. Therefore, as the Smalcald Articles testify, “nothing in this article can be yielded or rescinded. ‘For there is none other Name whereby we must be saved; and with His stripes we are healed.’ Upon this article depends all that we teach and do against the pope, the devil, and all the world. We must, therefore, be entirely certain of this, and not doubt it, otherwise all will be lost, and the pope and the devil, and our opponents, will prevail and obtain the victory.”<sup>70</sup>

This is also the doctrine from which the life of the Church flows. No man becomes a regenerated Christian without this doctrine. “A man only becomes a Christian by the Holy Ghost illuminating his

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<sup>65</sup> Schuetze, *Ecumenical Endeavor*, 61.

<sup>66</sup> Prange, vol. 2, 222.

<sup>67</sup> Schuetze, *Ecumenical Endeavor*, 59.

<sup>68</sup> This would be an excellent essay for a circuit to read and study. The following summary is only a taste of its depth. **See APPENDIX B.** Kurt Marquart translated the German into English in 1982. The English version printed in 1872 is not always a literal translation of the German. The Marquart translation is the superior version; cf. [www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/JustificationObjectiveSubjectiveMarquart.pdf](http://www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/JustificationObjectiveSubjectiveMarquart.pdf)

<sup>69</sup> F.A. Schmidt, “The Doctrine of Justification,” *Lutheran Standard*, November 1, 1872, p. 163.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. Smalcald Articles II, 5. Kolb-Wengert, p.301.

heart and showing him that he is redeemed, has the remission of sins, righteousness, etc., wherefore he can cheerfully depart in peace.”<sup>71</sup> The work of the ministry indeed rises or falls on this article: “If only the minister keeps this article pure, and if only his whole sermon is governed by the thought – salvation alone through Christ; then, even if he occasionally fails in the form or even in expression, it would do no injury; whereas another who does not live and move in this article, may indeed preach logically correct, but nevertheless fails to lead his congregation to true consolation. He may perhaps wonder himself, and his congregation with him, why this fruit will not follow; but the fault surely lies in the sphere of this article.”<sup>72</sup> If you start to feel your own inadequacy, take heart! “Now important as this doctrine is, it can nevertheless be preached in the fullness of its consolation, and power, and in all its transparency, even by those less liberally endowed.”<sup>73</sup> Even the weakest preacher has material to work with because God so loved the world.

Schmidt goes on to direct his listeners to three important points: 1) The doctrine of the universal (*allgemeine* “general”) redemption of the world; 2) the doctrine of the means of grace; and 3) to the doctrine of faith. The redemption of Jesus Christ “moves God to declare us poor accursed sinners righteous.” How does this comfort become ours? From God’s side, the instruments used are Word and Sacrament. From man’s side, the instrument it is faith. Schmidt noted, “Here there is a truly Babylonian confusion among the sects, when they undertake to explain what is faith. One regards it as something transpiring in the mind, another as something experienced in the heart.” If the Synodical Conference could agree on these factors, namely, the redemption of Christ and of these instruments, then there would be true unity among them.<sup>74</sup>

The fourth thesis connects the universal, objective nature of sin with the universal, objective nature of justification. The redemption of Christ is not only for a select few, but for all people, even those who are lost. The Scriptures prove this when they talk about Christ’s work without restriction and apply the same sort of universality to the Fall of Adam. Schmidt highlights the following passages with added emphasis: “for the sin of the whole world” (1 John 2:2); “God was in Christ and reconciled the world with Himself and did not impute their sin to them” (2 Cor 5:19); “that everything might be reconciled through Him to Himself” (Col 1:20); and that “He by God’s grace tasted death for all” (Heb 2:9).

“We must not however extend the analogy between Christ and Adam too far, for there is a difference between grace and the curse. As soon as a man is man, he is in possession of the curse, but not in possession of the merits of Christ. The treasure indeed is provided for all, his debt is paid, forgiveness of sins, life and salvation is restored; but in order to take personal possession of this treasure, it is necessary that he should acknowledge and accept the work of Christ, and in this respect there is a difference between Adam and Christ.”<sup>75</sup> Christ does not beget natural descendants but spiritual ones, when sinful man acknowledges his work and accepts his salvation, which happens through faith.

The debt of the whole world is entirely paid in the death of Christ. What then was the point of the resurrection? It was not mainly to declare Jesus’ divinity or prove that we too will rise. No preachers often get the resurrection all wrong. “It was an act of God in which Christ was pronounced righteous. Christ entered into death laden not with his own, but with the sin and unrighteousness of the whole world. For the sake of these sins He was sentenced and consigned to

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Schmidt, “The Doctrine of Justification,” *Lutheran Standard* 30, no.22, (November 15, 1872), 170.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Schmidt, “The Doctrine of Justification,” *Lutheran Standard* 30, no.23, (December 1, 1872), 177.

death. When the Father raised Him, again He declared that the debt is discharged, He is righteous. As therefore Christ was condemned not for His own sake, but for the sake of mankind whose sins He bore; so was He not justified for His own sake by the resurrection. Mankind however was justified, for whose sake He died and rose again.”<sup>76</sup>

That raises some questions. How can it be that sin is removed and yet a debt remains on unbelievers? Schmidt explains, “The apparently contradictory statements of Scripture, that the world is absolved, and that the guilt rests upon unbelievers as long as they do not repent, must be solved in this wise: We must distinguish two ways in which God views mankind. When He views the world in Christ, He looks upon it with infinite love; but when He beholds it out of Christ, He can not otherwise than behold it with fiery indignation. Accordingly the wrath of God abides upon him who does not believe in Christ, or even rejects Him, notwithstanding the fact that God beholds him with the eyes of love when He beholds him in his Son and considers His atonement... *According to the procuration of salvation, God is no longer angry with any man; but according to the appropriation thereof, He is angry at every one who is not in Christ.*”<sup>77</sup> This is truly a mystery, namely, that God can love the world collectively but hate the sinner individually. Yet, we Lutherans are accustomed to submitting our reason to the Scriptures.

The completeness and perfection of our salvation is such a majestic gift. Yet, judgment awaits all who reject this gift. “The benefits of the kingdom of God are in store not only for those in the kingdom, but for all, without exception. There is room for all, but all do not take possession of the room. Those who oppose the doctrine of the perfect redemption of Christ generally say: Indeed, Christ redeemed all, but we are not perfectly redeemed until we believe. But those who make this affirmation, do not consider what they maintain. If we are saved by the belief that we are saved, salvation must previously be in store. Who would be so foolish as to imagine that by believing something to exist, we cause it to exist! Therefore, as certainly as God says we shall enjoy pardon and salvation, so certainly all these things must exist before we believe. When we make this affirmation we do not wish to tell people: Never mind if you do not believe, you can slip into heaven anyhow, for your atonement has already been made. On the contrary, we testify to them that their damnation is infinitely greater if they do not believe; for the table was prepared, but they would not come; therefore none of these slights shall taste of His supper.”<sup>78</sup> This truth has practical value in our preaching and teaching. Everyone to whom we minister is a blood-bought soul. “It would indeed be terrifying if a minister were obliged to think that the wrath of God was still abiding upon his congregation; but such not being the case, he can cheerfully exclaim, “*Be ye reconciled to God!*” God’s wrath has been extinguished. It’s not true, if you believe it. It’s true—believe it!

Schmidt includes lengthy quotations from the Formula of Concord to emphasize the truth.<sup>79</sup> He also includes common illustrations for justification peppered throughout his essay, such as, the king pardons the prisoners but some refuse to leave the jail cell. Or consider also how gold remains gold whether it’s thrown in the mud, left hidden away, or abused altogether. So too with the justification of the world in Christ. It is certain, declared, and precious.

The Norwegian Synod had faced a bitter struggle with the Augustana Synod and the Iowa Synod in the 1860s over the doctrine of absolution. Schmidt’s essay makes reference to this controversy and

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis original.

<sup>78</sup> Schmidt, “The Doctrine of Justification,” *Lutheran Standard* 30, no. 23 (December 1, 1872), 178.

<sup>79</sup> Formula of Concord, SD III, 57 (Kolb-Wengert, 572) was omitted from the English version published in the *Lutheran Standard*, but included in the German *Proceedings*. Also quoted was SD III, 9-16 (the German quotation being longer than the English version as printed).

states what Missouri and the Norwegians had been teaching for over a decade: “Absolution is nothing other than justification.” The practical value of objective justification is readily seen: “When the minister absolves, he dispenses the previously existing treasure of the forgiveness of sins. If the treasure did not exist, no minister could absolve, nor could we even speak of justification *by faith*, since faith is equivalent to the acceptance of what previously exists.”<sup>80</sup> What the world needs is to hear this good news, not have it hidden away. He goes so far as to say: “It is true there is no more sin in the world. Christ has taken it away; and in such a way the whole world is also free from death, the devil, and damnation. And this must be preached, and not obscured. The fear that people may abuse this doctrine dare not restrain the truth. And this is just what keeps back the fanatics from proclaiming it without any restriction. They imagine that it leads to carnal security.”<sup>81</sup> This is unconditional grace and full forgiveness at its best.

Some want to say that God has made the whole world righteous, but has not declared it to be so. But such assertions deny the whole of justification. Schmidt even answers those who claim they don't see this in the old dogmatians. He writes, “We can confidently preach: the world is justified, the world is reconciled with God, which latter expression too would be impermissible if the former were not true. Our older dogmatians too would themselves have used the expression more—since they believed and taught the substance—had not Huber shortly before Gerhard's time taught that God had not only justified all men already, but had also elected them to eternal life. In order to avoid the appearance of agreement with this erroneous doctrine, they used the expression only rarely.”<sup>82</sup> Schmidt then catalogues a litany of orthodox teachers who used Rom 4:25, Rom 5:18, 1 Tim 3:16, Isa 50:5, 2 Cor 5:15 & 19 to teach objective justification as he described it. The substance was there, even if certain expressions had more or less use or favor.

The critical sixth thesis highlights the means of grace: “This grace, forgiveness, righteousness, life and salvation, again acquired for all men by Christ's redeeming work, God brings to man in the means of grace. For the evangelical promise, which is contained in the Word of the Gospel and in the Holy Sacraments, is not an empty sound or a promise devoid of contents, but a powerful proffering (*Darreichung*) and presentation (*Schenkung*) of all the gifts, promised by God in the same Word of grace.” This is one of the crown jewels of the Lutheran Church which sets her apart from all fanatics. The means of grace are more than a public service announcement. They bring what they announce. “The Word and Sacraments are God's hands, by which He offers what Christ acquired and brought from the tomb. Hence we do not regard the Word and Sacrament as a mere sign-board or announcement, nor simply as a power conceiving and begetting faith; but a means unto the giving, communicating, and sealing of the gifts themselves, which they point out and announce. Rom. 1, 16, the Gospel is called the power of God unto salvation... It is not like a message accidentally heard behind the bars of a prison, but like a message conveyed by the authorized ambassador of a king in a sealed instrument of pardon.”<sup>83</sup> A Lutheran pastor's ordination does not give the pastor any special power. The power is in the Word which the ministry entrusted to him entitles and compels him to preach. Schmidt uses bread as a powerful illustration: “If someone should affirm that bread is nutritive only when eaten by the hungry, or that medicine possesses healing powers only when taken by the sick; the sectarians would perceive the ludicrousness of this assertion at once. It is the same with the Gospel, whether it be proclaimed to a person hungering and thirsting after righteousness, or to the ungodly. But it is true that bread does not nourish him who does not eat it; that medicine does not cure him who does not take it; and that the Gospel does

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<sup>80</sup> Schmidt, “The Doctrine of Justification,” *Lutheran Standard* 30, no. 24 (December 15, 1872), 185.

<sup>81</sup> Schmidt, “The Doctrine of Justification,” *Lutheran Standard* 30, no. 23 (December 1, 1872), 178.

<sup>82</sup> Kurt Marquart, translator, “The Doctrine of Justification,” 20.

<sup>83</sup> Schmidt, “The Doctrine of Justification,” *Lutheran Standard* 30, no. 24 (December 15, 1872), 186.

not comfort him who dies not believe it. But sectarians ought to see that the power of the Word no more resides in man than the nutritive power of bread. The denial of the efficacy of the Gospel and Absolution in the case of the impenitent involves fearful consequences.”<sup>84</sup>

The role of faith is taken up in the final four theses and simply repeated what had already been discussed throughout the essay. Thesis 10 states, “Accordingly faith in Christ does not justify and save because, as an excellent work of man, it acquires a bountiful merit before God, and as a satisfaction for sin reconciles Him unto man; but because, on man's part, it is the receiving hand which really embraces and accepts the treasure of the merits of Christ, forgiveness, righteousness and salvation, which are offered and presented in the promises of the Gospel.”<sup>85</sup> Schmidt had emphasized the passive nature of faith earlier in the essay: “The sectarians do not simply regard faith as a *hand*, but as a *condition* which man must fulfill before he can go to heaven; whereas faith is nothing but an empty hand which God must fill. If we had nothing else but faith, and not Christ (which, of course, is impossible), we would be damned with all our faith; for not the act of faith, but Christ whom we thereby embrace, makes us pleasing to God.”<sup>86</sup>

This monumental work of Lutheran orthodoxy closes with an apt comfort: “Although we believe this treasure to be offered unto all in the Word and Sacraments, we nevertheless do not deny, that God accounts the individual, when he embraces this treasure, as one who has this righteousness, and that, in the same hour, He records, as it were, his name in the Book of life, and that this is the justification, designated as such in ecclesiastical terminology. This forensic act extends through our whole life, since God continually repeats this declaration to man. We teach, when the individual believer has taken possession of the gift, God acknowledges this in His judgment, inasmuch as he has entered into Christ. As the Apostle says, “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.””<sup>87</sup> Justification is the heart of what we believe and confess. May it continue to be at the heart of what we teach. “What you win them with is what you win them to.”<sup>88</sup>

### *Mission Work*

The other essay presented at the first meeting of the Synodical Conference focused on mission work: “What is our duty toward the English population of our country?” It was presented by Professor Matthias Loy of the Ohio Synod. Coupled with Walther’s opening sermon on the salvation of souls, one can see how eager these men were for missions. Behind the scenes, the focus of mission work, especially among the English speakers had been a driving factor for the Ohio Synod to reach out to Missouri in the first place. Loy wrote to Walther in 1869, “One thing is clear to me that we are not doing for the propagation of the truth in the English community what ought to be done.”<sup>89</sup> This same spirit was found in the essay at the first convention. The Synodical Conference had the duty to preach the gospel because of the Lord’s command and also their responsibility to their country. They couldn’t claim that there’s enough work among the Germans and Scandinavians.

They also couldn’t claim that other churches were doing enough among the English. In fact, “The Lutheran Church is the Church of the pure Word, wherefore she is not only under obligations to convey that saving Word to the heathen, but also to those in the sects, who, though possessing

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<sup>84</sup> Schmidt, “The Doctrine of Justification,” *Lutheran Standard* 31, no.1 (January 1, 1873), 2.

<sup>85</sup> Schmidt, “The Doctrine of Justification,” *Lutheran Standard* 31, no. 2 (January 15, 1873), 11.

<sup>86</sup> Schmidt, “The Doctrine of Justification,” *Lutheran Standard* 30, no. 23 (December 1, 1872), 178. Emphasis original.

<sup>87</sup> Schmidt, “The Doctrine of Justification,” *Lutheran Standard* 31, no. 2 (January 15, 1873), 11.

<sup>88</sup> Jared Wilson quoted in Jonathan Bauer, “Our Lutheran Moment” essay to the SA District, June 8, 2022, 10.

<sup>89</sup> Prange, *Vol. 2*, 177.



portions of the true doctrine, mingled however with great and grievous errors, nevertheless are in danger of being lost.”<sup>90</sup> We have a responsibility to minister to these souls. Lutherans will be sure to respect the doctrine of the call, even among sectarian false teaching churches. We honor that and will not seek to intrude on another man’s ministry. But if someone comes to you, it’s another story. “When people of this description [of membership in heterodox churches] seek counsel of us with troubled consciences, we ought not, of course, deny to them the true consolation of the gospel.”<sup>91</sup> Loy also appealed for English churches to be established where possible, even if a German speaking church was nearby. He called for periodicals, hymnbooks, devotional materials and everything possible be produced in English. The goal of our preaching and teaching should be to put on full display and help people “marvel at the treasures of knowledge” in our Lutheran Church.<sup>92</sup>

The Synodical Conference clearly breathed a mission *Giest* that we would do well to imitate today. Every convention included detailed reports on “home missions” (*Innere Mission*), and the standing committee regularly solicited funds and presented ideas for future efforts. In 1873 a society was organized in the Detroit area for the deaf-mute; in 1874 there was a report about Chinese mission work in St. Louis; in 1884 the idea of a mission in Japan was proposed; in 1877 mission work among the “negroes” in the South was established. This latter endeavor is part of the reason the Missouri Synod today, by God’s grace, has a higher number of African-America clergy than other church bodies who are larger or “more diverse.”<sup>93</sup> The Synodical Conference also extended their mission work into Africa. For many years, this work was the only overseas mission work that the Wisconsin Synod helped carry out. These efforts were known as “heathen missions” and display the Conference’s zeal for preaching the gospel, even if the execution at times struggled.

*FUNDAMENTAL UNITY: Bearing with the Weak – Breaking with the Errorist*

One should not imagine that the unity of the Synodical Conference was perfect. “The confessional unity and fellowship that was so joyfully and gratefully expressed by the six synods in organizing the Synodical Conference did not preclude the need for further study of its application in practice. Likewise, the professed unity on the synodical level did not necessarily remove problems and rivalries that were present among congregations locally.”<sup>94</sup> This was still the *church militant*.

Next to justification, the doctrine of church fellowship received the most attention in practical terms. In the first years of the Conference, the synods met every year, and for five out of the first seven years they discussed “Theses on Church Fellowship” (*Kirchengemeinschaft*). The union of Lutherans gathered in 1872 did not come together because of absolute or perfect agreement on every teaching of Scripture. Fundamental unity was the basis for unity in the Synodical Conference and for fellowship between the Synods prior to the founding. They followed Walther’s Thesis V on “open questions”: “The Church militant must strive for *absolute* unity of faith and doctrine as its goal, but it never attains higher than a *fundamental* level of unity.”<sup>95</sup> What did our Lutheran fathers mean by “fundamental” unity? Prange summarizes it this way, “[Fundamental unity] entails sharing a common attitude toward Scripture in which Christians allow the clear Word of God to be the sole arbiter of doctrine and life. And then that common faith insists on striving for agreement on the

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<sup>90</sup> M. Loy, “What is Our Duty Toward the English Population of our Country,” *Lutheran Standard* 31, no.21 (November 1, 1872), 162.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>93</sup> See Schuetze, “Mission Work Among America’s Black Population,” 129-158.

<sup>94</sup> Schuetze, *Ecumenical Endeavor*, 62-63.

<sup>95</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *Walther’s Works: Church Fellowship*, (St. Louis: CPH, 2017), 142. Emphasis original. See also APPENDIX A.

chief articles of the Christian faith, articulated by and for Lutherans in the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.”<sup>96</sup> The Synodical Conference confessed their common faith with the whole Book of Concord, since it is nothing more than an elaboration of the doctrines taught in the Augsburg Confession.<sup>97</sup> While this is the case, “our Confessions do not claim to be a complete system of all doctrines taught by our church.”<sup>98</sup> Having a correct understanding of the Confessions and also having a correct understanding of unity are both important.

Johann Gerhard, the arch-theologian of the Lutheran Church, observed, “Unity of faith and doctrine in the Church is not a perfect and absolute one in this life; for at times controversies occur between members of the true Church through which this holy unity is torn. We therefore have to distinguish between that absolute, perfect unity, free from every form of disharmony, which is found nowhere except in the Church Triumphant, and that fundamental unity, which consists in agreement concerning the principal articles of doctrine, while with respect to a few less important points of faith (*fidei capitibus*) or to ceremonies that are a matter of indifference or to the interpretation of some Scripture passages controversies will arise. And this is the unity obtaining in the Church Militant; for in this Church there is never found such a definite harmony that no disagreements arise in it... Hence it is certain that a total and real absolute unity cannot be hoped for in this life. And therefore not every disagreement at once dissolves union and unity in the Church.”<sup>99</sup>

There will be disagreements within the Church. There will be a Peter-like disciple who will need a Paul to correct him, even on the central truth of the gospel (see Gal 2:11). There will be “sharp divisions” about how to carry out mission work and yet the unity in the church remains (see Paul and Barnabas parting ways, Acts 15:39). Luther would often say, “Judas must be among the apostles.” As St. Paul wrote, “There must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” (1 Cor 11:19). Disagreements can have a positive effect on the Church to test and refine those who travel through them.

Perfect unity is not possible in this life because the flesh still clings to us. No one will have a perfect knowledge of everything contained in Scripture. “The story of the incest of Judah and Tamar need not become known to all Christians.”<sup>100</sup> But once a person learns of the account, he is duty bound to believe that it is God’s inspired and inerrant Word, even if he struggles with it in a certain respect. The fundamental unity of which Walther and others spoke was also not a unity of exegesis, as if every passage needed to be handled the same way by everyone. The Lutheran Church has never made that type of “confession” determinative of church fellowship.<sup>101</sup>

But that doesn’t mean we are free to teach or believe whatever we want. Thesis VII from Walther on “open questions” stated: “*No one has the freedom, and to no man may be given the freedom, to believe and to teach otherwise than God has revealed in His Word, whether this refers to primary*

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<sup>96</sup> Prange, *Vol. 2*, 57.

<sup>97</sup> The Synodical Conference delegates declared, “The adoption of all the Symbols by said [Norwegian] Synod was required in its relations to the Conference, and its willingness to have doctrinal differences adjusted accordingly. Such being the assurance of the Norwegian Synod, it was admitted without further delay.” (“Proceedings of the Synodical Conference,” *Lutheran Standard*, November 1, 1872 Vol.30, no.21, page 161)

<sup>98</sup> Walther, *Church Fellowship*, 123.

<sup>99</sup> Walther quoting Gerhard, *Church Fellowship*, 101-102.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 97. Walther quoted J.A. Quenstedt (1617-1688) to make this point.

<sup>101</sup> Some did try, however. Abraham Calov, one of the giants of Lutheran Orthodoxy, attempted to have his *Consensus Repetitus Fidei Vere Lutheranae* (“The Demanded Consensus of the True Lutheran Faith”) adopted as a new confession in 1655. Calov wanted to root out crypto-Calvinists and so made things like the origin of the soul a point of doctrine; Scripture is silent with regard to *traducianism* or *creationism*.

or secondary fundamental articles of faith, fundamental or nonfundamental doctrines, matters of faith or life, historical matters or other matters subject to the light of nature, important or seemingly unimportant matters.”<sup>102</sup> The Word is God’s and so we cannot twist it or ignore it.

Then, one must ask, why is there the disagreement? Is it a weakness of faith or an ignorance arising from circumstances? Is it someone who stubbornly clings to their error? The Iowa theologians, Loehe, and others had received plenty of patience from the Missouri Synod. They wanted to say that certain teachings of Scripture were “open questions” because the Lutheran Confessions did not define them. They wanted to claim that there was a “doctrinal development” which the Church could await on things like ordination. Wilhelm Loehe, taught that “the symbols contain the sum of doctrines on which doctrinal agreement is necessary.”<sup>103</sup> They persisted in their error. They refused to receive instruction and wholly submit themselves to the Word. The Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Illinois Synods, meanwhile, displayed a different posture in discussions with the Missouri Synod.

Walther advocated both patience and firmness: “We are far from removed from the position that severs fraternal relations with an individual and stops having church fellowship with a church body if in their understanding of Bible-teaching they are not dogmatically correct. We by no means consider such correctness a condition of fellowship. If that were our position, we should have to contend against ourselves; for while we notice incorrect views, that is, errors, in others, other people may notice such imperfections in one or the other of us. No; as soon as an individual or a whole church body manifests the attitude of willingness to submit unconditionally to the whole Word of God and not to teach anything that opposes the foundation of the Christian faith, be it the real or the dogmatic or the organic foundation, we extend in every case with joy the hand of fellowship to such an individual, and we are altogether willing and ready to cultivate church fellowship with such an organization.”<sup>104</sup> Clearly there was room for growth and patience among brothers. Walther and the other leaders took the Lord’s encouragement to bear with one another (Col 3:13) and not snuff out the smoldering wick (Mt 12:20).

Even in days preceding the founding of the Synodical Conference, Walther wrote, “We certainly do not hide from ourselves that in the various synods advocating the ‘Synodical Conference’ there are still some weaknesses that threaten to disturb the unity, but by God’s grace all these synods are on the same right path to the one right goal. They are just as little ashamed to admit their shortcomings as to acknowledge the goal so that they have to repeat: In the same way it will also be accomplished by God, who has promised that he will allow the sincere to succeed—those who allow the truth to succeed—although the doing has to be added to the willing.”<sup>105</sup> This is the fundamental unity that brought together the Synodical Conference. It was especially important because of questions these young synods had about each other.

One pertinent question in 1872 has direct application in 2022: “When does a Lutheran body have the obligation to grant another church body the classification ‘orthodox’? ... This has to happen: 1. if the church is unconditionally committed to the symbols of our church; 2. if it also takes the right position on the points currently in dispute; [and] 3. if they are serious about the practice that is

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<sup>102</sup> Walther, *Church Fellowship*, 142.

<sup>103</sup> John Brenner, *The Election Controversy Among Lutherans in the Twentieth Century*, (Milwaukee: NPH, 2017), 111. (Hereafter referred to as *Election*.)

<sup>104</sup> Walther, *Church Fellowship*, 103.

<sup>105</sup> Walther quoted in Prange, *Vol. 2*, 198.

consistent with the right doctrine.”<sup>106</sup> This designation has application in our current climate and with the informal discussions between the WELS-ELS-LCMS—more on that in **Part 3**.

Roughly seventy-five years later, WELS Prof. John P. Meyer also pointed out there is another danger when discussing fundamental unity: “There is another sham form of fundamental agreement, which in reality represents anything but such fundamental agreement. It is this: Our fathers thoroughly searched the Scriptures and expressed their findings in certain phrases and propositions. These propositions may, moreover, have received their coloring from certain errors against which our fathers had to battle and which they tried to ward off by their formulations of the truths they found in the Scriptures. If we, their children, now content ourselves with simply repeating the terms our fathers coined, we may appear to be in complete agreement with them, while in reality, because we fail to mine those doctrines ourselves from the Scriptures themselves, we are virtually in basic disagreement. We accept the phrases and propositions as handed down; we accept them on the authority of the fathers, not because we have ourselves become sure of them out of the Scriptures. Traditionalism has then taken the place of the unreserved submission to the Word of God. There may be a world of difference between traditionalism and unionism, but under the skin they are twin brothers.”<sup>107</sup>

Note what has not been discussed: church membership. Peter Prange writes in his forthcoming, final volume of *Wielding the Sword of the Spirit* which discusses the Synodical Conference in detail, “The key biblical distinction being highlighted for the practice of Christian fellowship was the historic one between weakness in faith or understanding and a stubborn insistence on unscriptural error against better knowledge. Clearly, disqualifying someone from all expressions of Christian fellowship based solely on their church affiliation was not the principle by which C.F.W. Walther and many of his fellow Synodical Conference brothers operated.”<sup>108</sup> A person’s church membership was indeed regarded as part of their confession of faith, but that was not the sole point of contention. Lutherans have always made the distinction between weak brothers and persistent errorists, because it is the distinction of Scripture. The founders of the Synodical Conference did not slam the door to one another or check membership cards at the door. They had open and loving discussions on the basis of the Word and the Lutheran Confessions. That legacy remains ours today.

In summary, the legacy of the Synodical Conference in regard to church fellowship is eminently practical. Agreement in doctrine and practice is necessary for church fellowship. We follow Paul’s encouragement to Timothy: “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2). “On the other hand, however, if a church has exhausted all means of bringing such an erring brother to the acknowledgement of the truth and his adherence to the respective error evidently is not due to insignificant intellectual understanding of Scripture teaching, and hence through this non-fundamental error it becomes manifest that he consciously, stubbornly, and obstinately contradicts the divine Word and that accordingly through his error he subverts the organic foundation of faith [the Scriptures], then such an erring person, like all others that persevere in mortal sins, must no longer be borne with, but fraternal relationship with him must be terminated. The same thing applies to a whole church body which errs in a non-fundamental doctrine.”<sup>109</sup> The *Denkschrift* which announced the rationale for

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<sup>106</sup> Prange, *Vol. 2*, 199.

<sup>107</sup> J.P. Meyer, “Unionism,” *Essays in Church Fellowship*, (Milwaukee: NPH, 1996), 65.

<sup>108</sup> Peter M. Prange, *Wielding the Sword of the Spirit: Volume Three: The Doctrine and Practice of Church Fellowship in the Synodical Conference (1877-1882)*. (Wauwatosa, WI: Joh. Ph. Koehler Press, 2023), 382.

<sup>109</sup> Holtan, in *Walther: Churchman and Theologian*, 73-74.

the Synodical Conference testified to the beauty and blessedness of what was happening at the time: “As confessionally-faithful, Lutheran synods, we are now completely united to an unchanging and steadfast hold on to the precious treasure of pure doctrine. This treasure was handed down in the Confessions of our Lutheran church and taken from God’s Word. Both as a whole and individually, we hold on to this treasure as our highest possession and most valuable jewel. Also with God’s help, we will faithfully testify and contend against any distortion of this dearly-valued treasure.”<sup>110</sup>

### **Part 3: WELS-ELS-LCMS Today**

WELS Pres. Oscar Naumann wrote in 1972, “It has been clearly demonstrated by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod that it has rejected the confessional principles of the former Synodical Conference and has embraced the principles of the ecumenical movement. This movement seeks strength in doctrinal compromise and not in full agreement in doctrine and practice... It is a vain hope to expect the LC-MS to return to the confessional position of the former Synodical Conference.”<sup>111</sup> Naumann was especially talking about the doctrine and practice of church fellowship, as the LCMS was in fellowship with the American Lutheran Church (ALC) who had adopted women’s ordination at the time. Does the same judgment of Missouri hold true today?

This year also marks the Missouri Synod’s 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their 1847 founding. LCMS President Matthew Harrison recently wrote: “As the Missouri Synod struggled through post-WWII theological confusion, tragic but necessary divisions in 1974 and 1977, and numeric decline in the wake of radically shifting American demographics, the past half-century has left us bereft of triumphalism, or any theology of glory. For decades the “church growth movement” in the LCMS was convinced that if we just employed the right principles and methods, and multiplied them, growth would be assured, along with the salvation of ever-growing numbers. The church’s life is much more nuanced and mysterious. The LORD promises faith will accompany the proclamation of his Word, but it is faith “where and when he pleases.” (CA V) The Scriptures also teach us that whole generations have repeatedly turned from the LORD. The LCMS began as the result of German reawakening of biblical and then confessional consciousness. It, in turn, was but a part of a spiritual awakening that affected all Christians in the early/mid-nineteenth century. Today the world is “woke,” but hardly “awakened.””<sup>112</sup>

There have been some heartening trends in Missouri. Since 2012 representatives from the WELS, LCMS, and ELS have gathered annually for a few days of “informal” discussions. The 2013 meeting focused on church and ministry; 2014 focused on the doctrine of church fellowship; 2015 was on hermeneutics. In 2015 a joint statement was released from all three synods.<sup>113</sup> Rev. Dr. Albert B. Collver III, director of LCMS Church Relations, stated at the time, “The informal discussions have resulted in the recognition that the three synods ... have significant agreement in the primary areas of theology. We also recognize that a great deal of additional conversation and work must continue on areas where we do not have full agreement.”<sup>114</sup> The joint report stated agreement in the

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<sup>110</sup> F.A. Schmidt, *Denkschrift*, “Explanation of the Reasons, why the Lutheran synods uniting into a Synodical Conference, could not join any of the associations of synods” (1871), trans. by Prof. Souksamay Phetsanghane.

<sup>111</sup> Oscar J. Naumann, “1872-1972,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 68, no. 4(October 1971), 263-264.

<sup>112</sup> Matthew Harrison, “Introduction to the 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, Spring 2022, vol.95, No.1, 9.

<sup>113</sup> The report can be found here: <https://synodadmin.welsrc.net/download-synodadmin/joint-els-lcms-wels-statement-dec-2015/>

<sup>114</sup> LCMS Reporter, accessed at <https://reporter.lcms.org/2015/lcms-wels-els-report>

following areas: “We agree that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God and the only source of authority for doctrine and practice... We agree that the chief message of the Bible is justification by grace through faith in the merits of Jesus Christ, and that the entire Bible is Christ-centered. All of us also confess without reservation (*quia*) that the Lutheran Confessions are a correct exposition of the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>115</sup> These are good signs, yet it should be noted that the professors of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, who were suspended by the LCMS in 1974 and led the “Seminec Walkout” said many of the same things.<sup>116</sup> To be fair, this 2015 report was an informal document with a casual, hopeful tone to it.<sup>117</sup> Future statements, if they intend to state agreement on areas which have been in contention between our church bodies, should have a clear thesis-antithesis framework. Our leaders are well aware of this fact.

Caution and circumspection are needed, because there are also “reports” from similar discussions between the LCMS and other church bodies. In 2016 the North American Lutheran Church (NALC), the Lutheran Church—Canada (LCC), and the LCMS held doctrinal discussions. That group produced a document called “God’s Word Forever Shall Abide.”<sup>118</sup> This statement had many fine sounding words, but it was also filled with false teaching and confusion over the character, nature, and use of Holy Scripture. For example, when this statement called Holy Scripture, “inerrant,” it went on to describe it in this way: “a book that is completely reliable.” Conspicuous by its absence is any mention that the Bible is without error.<sup>119</sup> It has other marks of the historical critical method.

WELS President Schroeder noted that the “informal” designation is “an indication that we recognize that a restoration of fellowship is not anticipated in the near future. Rather, these meetings are intended to provide a forum that increases mutual understanding of each synod’s doctrine and practice and to establish good lines of communication between the synods.”<sup>120</sup> LCMS President Harrison concurred in 2018, “We are not close to fellowship, but we are talking very frankly to each other. Many myths and misunderstandings have faded away. Great friendships have developed, along with respect.”<sup>121</sup> According to the press release from 2019 there was “complete agreement” on the doctrine of justification (especially its objective nature). There were, however, differences on the doctrines of the ministry and prayer fellowship. Plans for 2020 were to include those same topics and also include the roles of men and women. Then, Covid.

### *Differences that Divide*

What are the differences between Wisconsin (and the ELS) and Missouri today? It’s a question that’s commonly asked. One must be careful to be honest, but also not exaggerate things. There are obvious differences in doctrine and then there are differences in practice, even when doctrine is aligned. The three main areas of difference are church and ministry, fellowship, and the roles of men and women. Professor Brug’s contention is that “the doctrine of church fellowship continues to

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<sup>115</sup> <https://ilc-online.org/2015/12/15/lcms-wels-and-els-leaders-report-significant-doctrinal-agreement/>

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Paul A. Zimmermann, *A Seminary in Crisis: The Inside Story of the Preus Fact Finding Committee*, (St. Louis: CPH, 2007).

<sup>117</sup> E.g. Page 2 states, “it seemed that we agreed with each other on this doctrine [of the church].”

<sup>118</sup> This would be a good document for a pastors’ study circuit to read thoroughly and evaluate. Accessed at <https://thenalc.org/wp-content/uploads/Documents/Teaching%20Statements/LCC-LCMS-NALC-Statement-on-Scripture-FINAL-2016-07-28.pdf>

<sup>119</sup> This was one of the major points of contention in the late 1950s, e.g. a paper by Prof. Martin Scharlemann of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Cf. Mark Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods*, (Milwaukee: NPH, 2003), 324.

<sup>120</sup> Mark Schroeder, “WELS-ELS-LCMS Continue Informal Discussions,” *Together*, December 17, 2019. Accessed online at <https://wels.net/wels-els-lcms-continual-annual-informal-discussions/>

<sup>121</sup> Facebook post, dated December 1, 2018. Accessed July 29, 2022.

be the major divisive issue between the WELS and the LCMS.”<sup>122</sup> In the opinion of this writer, the biggest practical hurdle to overcome is the doctrine and practice of the roles of men and women.

The LCMS has a different doctrine regarding **church fellowship and its application**. In the 1980s, following the supposed “cleansing” of the Preus presidency in the 1970s, the Synod officially adopted a “levels of fellowship” approach. The LCMS still maintains that agreement in doctrine and practice is necessary for pulpit and altar fellowship, a lesser degree of unity for prayer fellowship,<sup>123</sup> and an even lower degree for “cooperation in externals.” It is surprising to a WELSer what they designate as “cooperation in externals.” Across the country the LCMS and the ELCA continue to operate numerous elementary and high schools together as such an external thing. WELS has consistently maintained that “joint work in the education of children in the Word demands an agreement in what the Word teaches.”<sup>124</sup> Around the world, the Missouri Synod also has a variety of church associations and connections which at times put it in triangular fellowship with the ELCA and the Lutheran World Federation. President Harrison has been working to correct these errors, but it will take a long time for certain changes to be made.

The issue of closed communion also falls under the umbrella of fellowship. According to the LMCS website, “Perhaps no other question has been given more attention in our Synod, especially in the last 25 years, than the question of Communion practice.”<sup>125</sup> The LMCS and WELS have both historically confessed adherence to closed communion. The 2007 LCMS Convention reaffirmed that “that all pastors and congregations who have established and practice Communion fellowship contrary to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions be encouraged by the 2007 LCMS convention to immediately cease such practice.” There are issues in Missouri around what closed communion means—which is why President Harrison recently edited an anthology of essays entitled, *Closed Communion: Admission to the Lord’s Supper in Historical Perspective* (CPH, 2017). Some LCMS pastors and congregations have very different practices, depending on what part of the country you find yourself. For example, LCMS congregations in Florida-Georgia are known for practicing “close communion” in the sense that if you’re “close enough” to them doctrinally, you can commune at their altars.<sup>126</sup> (Perhaps one reason to avoid the confusing term “close” even though some feel it has a softer, warmer tone.)

In the past the Boy Scouts were a major issue between our church bodies.<sup>127</sup> Nothing has changed officially on this issue. “The WELS continues to oppose membership in the Scouts because the mandatory Scout Oath and Scout Law promote a spirit of self-righteousness. This is contrary to the gospel of free salvation through the grace of God as shown in Christ’s atoning sacrifice for sin.”<sup>128</sup> The Boy Scouts also participate in unionistic worship and make a clear confession of the truth impossible. The LCMS does not see any doctrinal issues with Scouting and claims to have no

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<sup>122</sup> John F. Brug, *WELS and Other Lutherans 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (Milwaukee: NPH, 2009), 20.

<sup>123</sup> The LCMS distinction between “prayer fellowship” and “joint prayer” has also resulted in more subterfuge. Their COP in the early 1980s approved a distinction between “worship services” and “convocations, rallies” which reflects different levels of fellowship. Cf. Brug, 24-25.

<sup>124</sup> Joel Otto, “License vs. Legalism: Finding the Narrow Middle Road in Applying the Doctrine of Church Fellowship (with Special Reference to “Cooperation in Externals””), October 21-23, 2007, p. 6.

<sup>125</sup> Found at <https://www.lcms.org/about/beliefs/faqs/doctrine#communion-history>

<sup>126</sup> Cf. a pastor’s account: [www.zionwest.org/45-news/393-closed-communion-repentance-and-faith.html](http://www.zionwest.org/45-news/393-closed-communion-repentance-and-faith.html)

<sup>127</sup> See Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods*, 335. “We were shocked beyond measure” to learn that the LCMS suddenly had the second most Boy Scout troops among Lutheran synods. The *Northwestern Lutheran* editor also noted how the whole issue made him “sick at heart.” William Schaefer, “Boy Scouts and the Missouri Synod,” *NL* 32 (June 10, 1945), 122.

<sup>128</sup> Brug, 45.

“official” position for or against Scouting, yet in 2015 they dissolved the formal “Memorandum of Understanding” with the Boy Scouts of America, after the Scouts allowed gay troop leaders.<sup>129</sup>

In 2009 Prof. Brug wrote, “In recent years the LCMS has shown no interest in discussing these issues with the WELS. This is not necessarily bad, since it may be best for the LCMS to first establish internal agreement on this [fellowship] issue. Because of this unwillingness of the LCMS to reopen the issue, there is at present no reason to be optimistic that this dispute can be resolved in the near future. The WELS can only continue to give its testimony and to pray that through the power of his Word and Spirit, the Lord will restore the agreement in the scriptural principles which the two synods once shared.”<sup>130</sup> Today in 2022 there have been some signs of improvement and for that we give thanks. Perhaps through informal discussions our faithful testimony can be more clearly given.

**The issue of church and ministry** has also divided WELS and Missouri. There are historical differences based on different movements and events; and doctrinal differences still exist, but there is some debate about the degree of difference. For example, the official Missouri position adopted by their 1981 Synod Convention the office of the public ministry was limited to “the pastoral office.”<sup>131</sup> Yet, in Missouri you will find a wide range of perspectives. There are some who hold what is often called the “Wisconsin position” that there is one divinely instituted office with various forms, of which the pastoral office is the most comprehensive. Some in Missouri are Romanizing Lutherans who follow the lead of Wilhelm Loehe and J.A.A. Grabau with their hierarchical tendencies. Others hold a modified view somewhere in between. The current LCMS is also fighting a battle against women’s ordination; their previous president, Gerald Kieschnick, seems to be one in favor of the practice. Again, Pres. Harrison has been standing firm against the issue and edited an anthology designed at stemming the tide, i.e. *Woman Pastors? The Ordination of Women in Biblical Lutheran Perspective* (CPH, 2012).<sup>132</sup> The problem remains with those who tolerate the teaching and agitate for it. For a synod to retain the title “orthodox” it must not tolerate false teaching.

It is hard to say where the LCMS stands exactly, even with relation to the doctrine of the church. Franz Pieper taught that the local congregation is the only divinely instituted form of church, all others being “human institutions.” This made Matthew 18 doctrinal discipline only possible on the congregational level, but there are signs this rigidity has fallen out of the mainstream. The 2010 LCMS Convention adopted Walther’s *Kirche und Amt* (Church and Office) as their doctrinal position. Of course, we must ask: “what does this mean?” This is an area where our Scriptural witness, along with the ELS, could bear much fruit. There have been some who say that “the Synod is church,” but the latest theology textbook in Missouri denies the rights and privileges of “church” to the synod.<sup>133</sup>

The military chaplaincy falls under the doctrine of church and ministry, and it was always a point of debate in the Synodical Conference. Neither synod has changed their position. During World War I, the WELS and LCMS used “camp pastors” to serve our men in uniform. Between the wars, Missouri changed their practice and started participating in the US government program. WELS has continued to use civilian chaplains to serve our men and women in uniform. The two major issues are the doctrine of the call (i.e. the government is the calling body) and the unionistic practices inherent in the chaplaincy program. Some today may point out exceptions based on your

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<sup>129</sup> See the press release: [https://reporter.lcms.org/2015/boy-scouts-of-america-update?fbclid=IwAR31\\_qkAAS6whnEqTlp0A0SZmEYzPHvLdV0mLhi5u6\\_Dbl1grxfK2iZJF\\_8](https://reporter.lcms.org/2015/boy-scouts-of-america-update?fbclid=IwAR31_qkAAS6whnEqTlp0A0SZmEYzPHvLdV0mLhi5u6_Dbl1grxfK2iZJF_8)

<sup>130</sup> Brug, 29.

<sup>131</sup> Brug, 48.

<sup>132</sup> See my review of this volume: <https://www.wisluthsem.org/review-women-pastors/>

<sup>133</sup> Samuel Nafzger, editor. *Confessing the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, (CPH 2017), 937.



denomination or make a defense of the chaplaincy for the sake of missions, but keep in mind: “there are no denominations in foxholes.”

The last area of current disagreement with the Missouri Synod deals with the roles of men and women. There is no difference between us on the teaching that men and women are equally redeemed by Christ (Galatians 3:28). In God’s kingdom we are all equal heirs of salvation through faith and for many years we were agreed that different roles still existed. Even into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century we were united that, on the basis of 1 Tim 2:12 and 1 Cor 14:34, only men should serve as pastors and in roles that exercise authority in the church. Headship for men and submission for women were the biblical principles we confessed together.<sup>134</sup> That changed rapidly after WELS suspended fellowship with Missouri in 1961. At the 1969 Denver Convention the LCMS accepted a change in their doctrine and practice to allow woman suffrage in the church. This also opened the doors to women serving in all offices in the church, except for parish pastor. It has been a veritable “time of the judges” ever since. Officially, women are also not to serve as elders in congregations, but the doctrinal oversight and discipline on this matter has been lacking. Women now serve as delegates to the LCMS convention each year, even though some congregations remain opposed to woman suffrage. It was surprising for this WELS pastor to learn how much the LCMS Seminary in Fort Wayne has written against woman suffrage over the years. Does the Savior’s warning apply here: “A house divided against itself cannot stand” (Mk 3:25)?

There are other issues within Missouri and between Missouri and WELS-ELS which could be discussed, but these are the major areas. We, Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, are sinners too, in need of constant renewal and correction by the Holy Spirit—lest anyone regard this list as Schaefer’s version of the Festivus “Airing of Grievances.”<sup>135</sup> May God the Holy Spirit guard and keep us.

### **CONCLUSION: A Path Forward**

Lutherans are honest people. A recent word from the ELS spoke clearly: “The issues which led to our suspension of fellowship with the LCMS in 1955 have not been resolved in these subsequent seven decades. However, there are welcome signs of renewed commitment to Scripture and the Lutheran confessions within the church body. There is a common confessional “language” between some in the LCMS and the ELS. Yet it cannot be denied that within the LCMS of the 2020s, there remains a doctrinal divide. There are those who are very close to us in doctrine and practice, yet there are those who are far closer to the false teachings (e.g. women pastors, open communion) of the ELCA.”<sup>136</sup> The issues are legion within Missouri. We must confess that the church militant is always beset with strife, but to imagine uniting with a divided church body at this time is neither right nor safe. The prospects of fellowship are still off in the future, but we pray God may bring them near.

Professor E.C. Fredrich wrote, “In our time ecumenical encounters and endeavors are all too frequently characterized by top-level discussions and fiats handed down from above. Ivory towers are busily engaged, but ivory towers do not necessarily reach up to where the Holy Spirit dwells or

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<sup>134</sup> See Benjamin Schaefer, “Avoiding the Hornet’s Nest: Woman Suffrage and Synodical Conference Lutherans 1890-1930,” thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of STM Degree (Church History), Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary 2020. Found at <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/5921>

<sup>135</sup> In the TV show *Seinfeld*, George Costanza’s family had their own holiday, called “Festivus” and started with “The Airing of Grievances.” Frank uttered immortal words: “I’ve got a lot of problems with you people!”

<sup>136</sup> Thomas L. Rank, “The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod 1847-Present,” *The Lutheran Sentinel*, May-June 2022, page 7.

down to where the desired unity is to be lived.”<sup>137</sup> Historically, free conferences and brother-to-brother conversations have borne the most fruit. Where the Spirit is at work through the Word, there blessings and brotherhood are sure to follow. This would be one of the deficiencies in our current *modus operandi* between WELS-ELS-LCMS. Doctrinal agreement is not manufactured in closed door sessions and then magically brought forth for pastors, people, and congregations to accept. If you wait with bated breath to see what comes from the next informal discussion, I might suggest that you check your brain’s oxygen level. These types of doctrinal discussions, even if they were “formal,” are not intended to create unity, but to see whether true unity exists.

The way a church body approaches questions of doctrine and practice is foundational. In the controversies and creation of the Synodical Conference there were different approaches to theological questions. Iowa generally only accepted those doctrines as laid down in the Lutheran Confessions as binding on Christians and churches, favoring the “open questions” approach to theology. Ohio generally viewed Scripture as a united whole and sought to systematize and harmonize doctrine; this practice is now found by some in Missouri who speak of “the whole of Scripture” or “the totality of the gospel” as proof for a position. In contrast, the Missouri, Wisconsin, and the Norwegian Synods had a different approach. J.P. Koehler summarized it years later: “Theological procedure in establishing Scriptural doctrine starts out with assembling all the passages that expressly deal with a certain doctrine... Next is the study of this detail according to the wording of the Scriptures. The wording comprises the meaning of the individual words according to their etymology and usage in the particular context.”<sup>138</sup> These different approaches to theology created vastly different outcomes in the practice of church fellowship. The same is true today.

St. Paul wrote, “Let us... decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother” (Romans 14:13). Our ELS-WELS leaders have also been working to avoid giving offense through these discussions. We have people in our congregations and in our pulpits who fled the false teaching and practice of the Missouri Synod. They treasure the gospel and faithful confession of our church body. To imply that we are “getting the band back together” could cause great offense to such souls. Consider the stir caused in some corners by having the LCMS president address the 2021 WELS and ELS Synod Conventions. One might question the wisdom of such action. One might rejoice that friendships have developed. All must be careful not to equate friendship and fellowship as the same thing. Optics matter.

What will we do today? We certainly pray for continued improvement in the LCMS and for a unity through the Word. But we must guard the good deposit, contend for the faith once for all entrusted to the saints, and seek to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. “The strength of any church body and of any federation of church bodies lies in the Word of God and in a faithful adherence to that Word both in doctrine and practice and not in compromising that doctrine and practice.”<sup>139</sup> A sound doctrinal stand, based on the Scriptures and defended by able teachers, is necessary for a healthy orthodox church. But there also arises a danger of being “ecclesiastically smug,” cocksure, and separatistic when sinful hearts are convinced of their own superiority. J.P. Koehler often decried this attitude in his day, and he believed that it is especially important for pastoral leaders to model a humble attitude toward others because the opposite perspective so easily infects a community of orthodox Christians. On the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Synodical Conference Koehler wrote words that are fitting for us today: “The cry of a noisy Hurrah is out of

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<sup>137</sup> E.C. Fredrich, “A Few, Faithful in Few Things: Our Synod’s Fathers and the Formation of the Synodical Conference,” found in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 69, no.3 (July 1972), 154.

<sup>138</sup> Quoted in Brenner, *Election*, 118.

<sup>139</sup> Oscar J. Naumann, “1872-1972,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (October 1971), 265.

place in the present situation, but a holy quiet earnestness is called for, which trusting in God firmly grips the plot to do the work set before us.”<sup>140</sup> That work includes loving our neighbor, getting to know the local LCMS pastors around us, and being patient with everyone. What the *Denkschrift* stated in reference to the General Council, we can apply to the Missouri Synod: “We, on our part, believe with the recognized orthodox and confessionally-faithful doctrinal fathers of our church, in the best days of the church’s existence. We believe that it is simply incompatible with being faithful to the office and with the church role of a Lutheran pastor (*Seelsorger*), if he knowingly and willfully opens his pulpit to heterodox preachers or serves the Holy Supper to members of heterodox church bodies. As a steward of God’s mysteries and as a called servant of God’s orthodox church, he is divinely-obligated to wisely and faithfully use doctrinal correction against false doctrine to preserve the pure doctrine (i.e., the discipline commanded in God’s Word, Titus 1:9-11), to bear a powerful testimony for the pure doctrine and against false doctrine. It is also his divine obligation to exclude members of unbelieving and heretical church bodies from the rights and benefits of church fellowship in the orthodox church. This *would keep up the dividing wall that God has commanded between pure and false doctrine as well as between pure and false churches.*”<sup>141</sup>

However, we must still find room for love and patience. The *Denkschrift* also stated, “It is our will and intention with this to condemn only the false and seductive teachings and the stiff-necked teachers and blasphemers of those teachings, whom we will by no means tolerate in our lands, churches, and schools, because they contradict the expressed Word of God and cannot coexist beside it. We do this so that pious hearts may be warned against them, since we have no doubt at all that *many pious, innocent people*, even in these churches, are to be found who up until now have not come to agreement with us in everything. They walk in the simplicity of their hearts, do not understand the matter correctly, but take no pleasure in the blasphemies.”<sup>142</sup> Simply put, we cannot label all LCMS people as “persistent errorists” who must be marked and avoided.

The Wisconsin Synod has a rich heritage and bright future ahead under God’s blessing. But we must be honest with ourselves and with our people. In repentance and faith, we must turn to the One who has suffered, died, and risen for our justification. In him we have peace and freedom: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). Too often we have taken our heritage for granted; too often we have cruised on autopilot amid a “frenetic shallowness.” Lord, have mercy on us. August Pieper closed his extensive “Anniversary Reflections” in 1922 by saying: “That is the great evil of the church in our day: we pastors and teachers of the church do not study enough, and we pray even less. We are so busy with ecclesiastical externals, and our spiritual life is all too sterile... That is our evil, and its source lies in the study, in the pastor’s little prayer chamber, from which the Spirit has fled because we pray and study only in connection with our work and all too little for the sake of our own soul. If a halt is to be called to the further ruin of the Lutheran church in our land and a new springtime of the Spirit is to burst upon it, there must first of all be a new Pentecost—in the pastor’s study.”<sup>143</sup>

**Rev. Benjamin P. Schaefer**  
**Festival of St. Luke, Evangelist**  
**October 18, 2022**

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<sup>140</sup> J.P. Koehler, “The Synodical Conference in the History of the Lutheran Church in America,” *Faith-Life*, May 1956, vol.29, no.5 p.9, originally printed in *Theologische Quartalschrift*, July 1922, Vol.19, no 3.

<sup>141</sup> Schmidt, *Denkschrift*, “Explanation,” 10. Emphasis original.

<sup>142</sup> Schmidt, *Denkschrift*, “Explanation,” 11. Emphasis original.

<sup>143</sup> August Pieper, “Anniversary Reflections,” in *The Wauwatosa Theology Volume 3*. Curtis Jahn, editor, (Milwaukee: NPH 1997), 293-294.

## **APPENDIX A: “Theses on Open Questions” by Dr. Walther, 1868**

(These theses are the ones on the basis of which the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods established fellowship.)  
Accessed at <https://wels.net/about-wels/what-we-believe/doctrinal-statements/church-fellowship/WELS>

**THESIS I.** It cannot be denied that in the field of religion or theology there are questions which, because they are not answered in the Word of God, may be called open in the sense that agreement in answering them is not required for the unity of faith and doctrine which is demanded in the Word of God, nor does it belong to the conditions required for church fellowship, for the association of brethren or colleagues.

**THESIS II.** The error of an individual member of the Church even against a clear Word of God does not involve immediately his actual forfeiture of church fellowship, nor of the association of brethren and colleagues.

**THESIS III.** Even if an open error against the Word of God has infected a whole church body, this does not in itself make that church body a false church, a body with which an orthodox Christian or the orthodox church would abruptly have to sever relations.

**THESIS IV.** A Christian may be so weak in understanding that he cannot grasp, even in a case of a fundamental article of the second order, that an error which he holds is contrary to the Scriptures. Because of his ignorance he may also continue in his error, without thereby making it necessary for the orthodox church to exclude him.

**THESIS V.** The Church militant must indeed aim at and strive for complete unity of faith and doctrine, but it never will attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one.

**THESIS VI.** Even errors in the writings of recognized orthodox leaders of the Church, now deceased, concerning nonfundamental doctrines of the second order do not brand them as errorists nor deprive them of the honor of orthodoxy.

**THESIS VII.** No man has the privilege, and to no man may the privilege be granted, to believe and to teach otherwise than God has revealed in His Word, no matter whether it pertain to primary or secondary fundamental articles of faith, to fundamental or nonfundamental doctrines, to matters of faith or of practice, to historical matters or other matters subject to the light of reason, to important or seemingly unimportant matters.

**THESIS VIII.** The Church must take steps against any deviation from the doctrine of the Word of God, whether this be done by teachers or by so-called laymen, by individuals or by entire church bodies.

**THESIS IX.** Such members as willfully persist in deviating from the Word of God, no matter what question it may concern, must be excluded.

**THESIS X.** From the fact that the Church militant cannot attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one, it does not follow that any error against the Word of God may be granted equal rights in the Church with the truth, nor that it may be tolerated.

**THESIS XI.** The idea that Christian doctrines are formed gradually and that accordingly any doctrine which has not completed such a process of development must be counted among the open questions, militates against the doctrine that the Church at all times is strictly one, and that the Scripture is the one and only, but fully sufficient source of knowledge in the field of Christian religion and theology.

**THESIS XII.** The idea that such doctrines as have not yet been fixed symbolically must be counted among the open questions, militates against the historical origin of the Symbols, particularly against the fact that these were never intended to present a complete doctrinal system, while they indeed acknowledge the entire content of the Scriptures as the object of the faith held by the Church.

**THESIS XIII.** Also the idea that such doctrines in which even recognized orthodox teachers have erred must be admitted as open questions militates against the canonical authority and dignity of the Scriptures.

**THESIS XIV.** The assumption that there are Christian doctrines of faith contained in the Holy Scriptures, which nevertheless are not presented in them clearly, distinctly, and unmistakably, and that hence they must be counted with the open questions militates against the clarity, and thus against the very purpose or the divinity of the Holy Scriptures, which is offered to us as the divine revelation.

**THESIS XV.** The modern theory that among the clearly revealed doctrines of the Word of God there are open questions is the most dangerous unionistic principle of our day, which will lead consistently to skepticism and finally to naturalism.

## **APPENDIX B: The Doctrine of Justification**

Found at <https://www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/JustificationEssay1872.pdf>

*With particular reference to a controversy waged by the Norwegian and Augustana Synods.*

**Thesis 1.** The doctrine of Justification is the prime article of the Christian faith, the true knowledge and pure proclamation of which is of incomparable importance and absolute necessity for individual salvation and the welfare of the whole Church.

**Thesis 2.** By the mercy of God, the Reformation of the Church through the instrumentality of Dr. Luther took its rise in a renewed knowledge of the pure doctrine of Justification, and in the consequent incorrupt proclamation of this article of faith.

**Thesis 3.** The pure doctrine of Justification, as again conspicuously set forth by our Lutheran Church from the Word of God, involves three leading points: 1. The doctrine of the universal and perfect redemption of the world by Christ; 2. The doctrine of the power and efficacy of the means of grace; and 3. The doctrine of faith.

**Thesis 4.** As in Adam all men have fallen and passed under the wrath of God and everlasting damnation as the punishment of sin, so also in Christ, as the second Adam, all men have been truly redeemed from sin, death, devil, and hell, and God is truly reconciled to them all.

**Thesis 5.** As by the vicarious death of Christ, the guilt of the whole world was cancelled, and the punishment thereof was borne; even so by the resurrection of Christ, righteousness, life, and salvation is restored for the whole world, and in Christ, as the Substitute of all mankind, has come upon all men.

**Thesis 6.** This grace, forgiveness, righteousness, life and salvation, again acquired for all men by Christ's redeeming work, God brings to man in the means of grace. For the evangelical promise, which is contained in the Word of the Gospel and in the Holy Sacraments, is not an empty sound or a promise devoid of contents, but a powerful proffering (*Darreichung*) and presentation (*Schenkung*) of all the gifts, promised by God in the same Word of grace.

**Thesis 7.** The Gospel is therefore not a mere historical narration of the accomplished work of redemption, but rather an effectual declaration of peace and Divine promise of grace to the world redeemed by Christ, and thus always an effectual means of grace, in which God on His part brings, proffers, distributes, gives and bestows the forgiveness of sins and righteousness acquired by Christ, although all, to whom God extends His sincere and gracious call, do not accept this invitation of the reconciled God, and thus do not become partakers of the accompanying gifts.

**Thesis 8.** Holy Absolution is a proclamation of the Gospel to one or more particular persons, who desire the comfort of the Gospel. The same is therefore always valid and effectual of itself; for God, through the mouth of His minister, therein declares Himself truly reconciled by the blood and death of Christ, and on His part communicates the gift of forgiveness and Justification to all who receive Absolution, though many do not become partakers of the gifts of grace extended in the Gospel on account of their unbelief.

**Thesis 9.** The only means by which man is put in possession of the grace acquired by Christ and extended in the Word and Sacraments is FAITH, which believes the gracious promises of God, and thus appropriates the gift of the merits and righteousness of Christ proposed in this promise of God, and seeks consolation in the benefits of Christ as its Savior and Destroyer of sin.

**THEESIS 10.** Accordingly faith in Christ does not justify and save because, as an excellent work of man, it acquires a bountiful merit before God, and as a satisfaction for sin reconciles Him unto man; but because, on man's part, it is the receiving hand which really embraces and accepts the treasure of the merits of Christ, forgiveness, righteousness and salvation, which are offered and presented in the promises of the Gospel. Neither does faith justify and save before God, because freely of grace and love, He is willing to account it as a meritorious work of righteousness and obedience towards God's Word; but because the treasure of the merits of Christ, which even the weakest faith embraces in the promises of the Gospel, really embrace the all-sufficient satisfaction for all the guilt and punishment of sin, as well as the perfect obedience toward all the demands of God's law.

**THEESIS 11.** Neither by its power does the faith of the individual render the Evangelical promises which God pronounces in the Word of the Gospel or Absolution really valid, effectual and true; but faith simply adheres to the promise of grace and forgiveness as Divinely true and effectual, and inasmuch as it thus accepts the promises of God, it also embraces the gift of righteousness and salvation therein, and has what the words declare.

**THEESIS 12.** When an individual sinner embraces the promises of the Gospel in the Word or Sacraments by faith, and thus appropriates the treasure of the merits of Christ unto his justification and salvation; he is also regarded, accounted, and pronounced of God, in a forensic action before the bar of God, as one who; for his own person, is partaker of the merits and righteousness of Christ unto salvation, and thus, by personal possession of the benefits of Christ, is also personally righteous and an heir of everlasting life.

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