

The Doctrinal Committee of '55

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Senior Church History

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THE DOCTRINAL COMMITTEE OF '55

The year is 1955. The organization is the Synodical Conference. During that year and under the auspices of the Conference, a committee met to discuss the doctrinal issues of the day, chief of which was the Common Confession. Now if history is viewed as a river, the story of this committee is only a small eddy on a side branch of it. Hardly the most earth-shaking news-event of the decade, in other words. And yet as an event, it does serve to picture for us the sad state of affairs in the Synodical Conference at that time. It also proves that the Wisconsin Synod was trying to do everything within its power to preserve the long-standing unity it had enjoyed within the Conference. Nevertheless, Wisconsin would not preserve that unity at the cost of doctrinal integrity. Without further preamble, let us examine that story.

The Larger Context of the Committee: the Common Confession

The committee owed its existence to the emergence of a union document known as the Common Confession. The Common Confession came out in 1949. It was the culmination of fourteen years of negotiations between the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. It was an irenic, positive document which confessed certain basic truths of Scripture. The Wisconsin Synod rejected it.

Placed in juxtaposition as they are, those two last statements might lead one to the conclusion that the Wisconsin Synod was a killjoy that hated to see any unity in American Lutheranism. This is not the case as we shall see once we examine the reasons why the Wisconsin Synod rejected it. There

had long been doctrinal disagreements between the members of the Synodical Conference and the constituent synods of the A.L.C. (Ohio, Iowa and Buffalo). These were not minor disagreements, either. To take but one example: in 1905, Ohio defined its position on justification as follows, "Through the reconciliation of Christ, the holy and gracious God has made advances to us, so that forgiveness of sin and justification have been made possible on His part; justification itself, however, does not occur until through God's grace, the spark of faith has been kindled in the heart of the poor sinner."¹ The position of the Synodical Conference had always been that justification had been more than 'made possible' by the reconciliation of Christ, it was already an objective fact for all people. God had declared the entire world righteous by raising His Son from the dead. Men were justified whether they believed it or not. If the Ohio people had been speaking of subjective justification, then what they said might have been understood correctly. But they were speaking of justification, period. Clearly, if there was disagreement on so basic an article of faith, there could be no fellowship.

Ohio did not change its position, either, once it had become a part of the new A.L.C. In 1938, the commissioners of the A.L.C. declared in an official document, "(God) purposes to justify those who have come to faith"² (italics mine).

Then along came the Common Confession which, in its irenic, positive way, stated the matter as follows: "By His redemptive work Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world; hence forgiveness of sins has been secured and provided for all men (This is often spoken of as objective justification) IICo 5:19."³ Now certainly a person cannot say that the Com-

¹ Lehre u. Wehre, Vol. 51, p. 388

² The Declaration as quoted in the Quartalschrift XXXV (April 1938), p. 209

³ quoted from the Quartalschrift, XLVII (July, 1950), p. 239

mon Confession here specifically teaches anything contrary to God's Word. But when we consider the historical differences between Missouri and Ohio and when we further consider the purpose of this document as a union document, then we will begin to view the irenic, positive nature of the Common Confession as its most basic flaw.

Missouri, meeting in convention in Milwaukee in 1950, accepted the Common Confession by passing Resolution #14. In that resolution it⁴ stated that, "The Common Confession shows that agreement has been achieved in the doctrines treated" (emphasis mine) and further, "If the American Lutheran Church. . . accepts it, the 'Common Confession' shall be recognized as a statement of agreement on these doctrines between us and the American Lutheran Church."⁴ The A.L.C. did adopt the Confession and so the Wisconsin Synod was obliged to view the document as an agreement between the two synods on the doctrines treated therein. That this is not overstating the case is proven by the following declaration of Missouri's Committee on Doctrinal Unity. When asked to clarify their Synod's resolution, they answered that the Common Confession was "a settlement of those doctrinal controversies that were before the church up to the time of the adoption of the Common Confession."⁵

Now, even a rank novice can see that the Confession states the doctrine of justification in such a way that both sides can see their own views contained in it. In fact, a person almost has to admire the ingenuity of the negotiators in coming up with a formula such as "forgiveness of sins has been secured and provided for all men." One can read it in Ohio's sense as "it is made possible", with the attendant idea that forgiveness or jus-

⁴as quoted by Joh. P. Meyer, "We Believe and Teach," *Quartalschrift*, XLVII (April 1950), p. 163: in this article he reviews the historical differences and compares the Common Confession with the Brief Statement by printing both

⁵Quoted in *Wisconsin Proceedings*, 1951, p. 146

4

tification does not actually occur until a person believes it. Or one can read it in Missouri's sense that 'secured and provided' equals 'forgiveness exists as an objective fact' for all men.

This irenic and positive document, then, could be viewed as an official lie, since it was presented as a settlement of the doctrinal issues of the past. It did not really settle those differences. At least, it did not settle them in a God-pleasing way by clearly confessing the truth and rejecting the error. It merely papered over them. The article on justification was only one example of this. Others could be cited. As Professor Meyer once said in a private letter to a Missouri Synod pastor, "We never charged the CC with false doctrine directly, but maintained that by offering formulations as a settlement, which in fact did not eliminate past errors, it opens the door wide to those errors and grants them equal right with the truth." And so the Wisconsin Synod in 1951 resolved to inform the Missouri Synod that, "We not only find the Common Confession to be inadequate in the points noted but that we also hold that (its) adoption involves an untruth and creates a basically untruthful situation."⁶ The Synod also asked that Missouri "repudiate its stand that the Common Confession is a settlement of past differences."⁷

The Common Confession thus caused a division to occur between two sister synods. Wisconsin desperately wished to recall Missouri back to the path that the two had formerly walked together and to this end it expended much effort. The only course open to the Wisconsin Synod was to continue its protest against Missouri's adoption of the document in the hope that Missouri would eventually 'see the light'.

The Immediate Background of the Committee

One of these efforts in the continuing protest was the Synodical

⁶ and ⁷ Wisconsin Proceedings, 1951, p. 147

Conference committee on doctrinal issues, which met in 1955. In order to understand the story of this committee in its proper context, it is necessary briefly to look at the events which led up to its appointment. When the Synodical Conference met in St. Paul in 1952, the Wisconsin men were not given a satisfactory answer on the Common Confession by the Missouri men. Due to the fact that the Missouri Synod possessed greater voting power in the Conference, it was able to get a resolution passed which postponed any official action on the Confession until its so-called Part II came out. As a result of this resolution, the Wisconsin Synod representatives declared themselves to be in a 'state of confession'. When Missouri met in convention in 1953, it considered the Common Confession, including Part II which had come out in the meantime, but it still resolved to "take no action on overtures pertaining to Part I of the Common Confession."⁸ The stated reason for this action--or lack of it--was that Part II was considered to have resolved somehow the problems of Part I. The Synod did not, however, officially accept Part II; it rather commended it for further study.

Wisconsin justifiably felt that again it had been given the run-around, so in 1953 it reiterated as^a Synod the state of confession which had been declared by the representatives to the St. Paul Synodical Conference meeting. Wisconsin also resolved to "prevail upon the President of the Synodical Conference to arrange a program for the convention in 1954 that would devote all its regular sessions to a thorough consideration. . . of the doctrinal issues." Finally, Wisconsin described itself as "anxiously and prayerfully awaiting an indication that the LC-MS will not persist in the present stand."⁹

The Synodical Conference met in 1954, but the Wisconsin men were still

⁸Missouri Proceedings, p. 532

⁹Synodical resolution as quoted in Quartalschrift L (October, 1953), p. 284

unable to prevail upon their Missouri brethren to repudiate the Common Confession, in spite of many essays and protests. The most Missouri would agree to do by way of Synodical Conference resolution was to "request the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod not to use the Common Confession as a functioning union document without, however, passing judgment pro or con on the doctrinal content."¹⁰ This was not much of a victory, however, since it had already practically ceased to function as a union document, due to the merger negotiations of the A.L.C. with other members of the American Lutheran Conference.

But the Missouri men did at least want to pour oil on troubled waters and to this end they also saw to it that a resolution was passed with this provision that "The Synodical Conference request the presidents of the constituent synods to appoint. . .committees on doctrine. . .To these committees they shall assign for study such areas of doctrine. . .as need clarification and settlement among us."¹¹ This is the resolution which led to the formation of the doctrinal committee of '55. It was not passed without the protests of many of the delegates who were attending the meeting.

The reason why many Wisconsin delegates protested such a resolution was the whole historical situation under which it was passed. The Wisconsin Synod had rejected the Common Confession in '51. It had gone into a state of confession in '53 because of it. It had declared itself to be "anxiously and prayerfully awaiting an indication" from Missouri of a real change of heart. So far Missouri had persistently refused to listen. They would not repudiate their Confession as a settlement of past differences. Many Wisconsin men felt that the creation of new machinery to discuss the issues could turn out to be just another method of Missouri for giving them the run-

¹⁰Quoted in the Quartalschrift, LII (January, 1955), p. 62

¹¹Ibid., p. 63

around. President Reim in an article in the Northwestern Lutheran declared that if the resolution had not been protested, "We would have nullified the urgency of our 1951 and 1953 resolutions."¹²

The Committee and its Meetings

So when in the February of 1955, President Naumann appointed Prof. Joh. P. Meyer, Pastor E.H. Wendland and Pastor O.J. Eckert as the Wisconsin contingent of the intersynodical committee on doctrinal issues*, it was with the understanding that it would only be a temporary assignment, until the Synod would meet later that year. Nevertheless, Wisconsin showed by its cooperation that it was unwilling to let any opportunity of resolving the issue go by--however dim its prospects for success might have been.

It was the faulty understanding of the temporary nature of this committee which almost caused it to founder before it had even set sail. Professor Meyer was ready to withdraw from the committee when he read a report in the Lutheran Witness written by President Behnken which did not mention the fact that the appointments to the committee were interim ones. He said in a letter to President Naumann, "The readers of the Witness cannot help but assume that the Wisconsin Synod is cooperating unconditionally and wholeheartedly. That will put our committee members under a cloud from the very beginning. We cannot negotiate without compromising the truth" (these and other letters quoted following are from a file of private correspondence in the possession of Pastor E.H. Wendland). The truth Professor Meyer is referring to is more than just the fact that the committee was temporary, but

¹²President E. Reim, "As We See It--the Chicago Convention," the Northwestern Lutheran, XLI, #25 (December 12 1954), p. 392

*President Naumann also appointed other men to serve on other intersynodical committees at the same time, including a committee on Unionism and Prayer-Fellowship and one on Scouting. For the purpose of this paper, we choose to limit our discussion to the doctrinal committee.

what the denial or suppression of that fact implied, namely, that everything was fine between the two synods since they had agreed to appoint long-standing committees to iron out their problems. If an impression like that had been conveyed, the Wisconsin Synod's declaration of a state of confession would have been rendered meaningless. Besides which, it might have appeared as if the Wisconsin Synod was completely disavowing the action of those at the Synodical Conference who had protested the resolution to form a doctrinal committee.

President Naumann wrote to President Behnken criticizing this oversight of his and stating that there would be no committee if it were not corrected. He underlined the purpose of the committee, as far as Wisconsin was concerned: "We intend to use the committee sessions to seek the answer that we have been anxiously and prayerfully awaiting." President Behnken responded by immediately publishing a clarification in the Lutheran Witness. The committee was only an interim action not extending beyond August, 1955, he said. He went on to express his regrets that he had not included that information in his previous statement. The crisis had been averted. The committee would now meet.

This entire exchange is indicative of the sorry state of affairs which then prevailed between Wisconsin and Missouri. One gets the impression that the Wisconsin men felt Missouri was just not taking their protests seriously enough. There was no doubt good reason to feel that way, in view of Missouri's past history. On the other side of the fence, one gets the impression of Missouri that it felt the Wisconsin Synod was overreacting to the whole situation. Consider President Behnken's statement in his official reply to President Naumann's letter: "Had I realized that the insertion (of the committee's interim nature) was considered to be of such importance as to make even the certification of members for intersynodical committees de-

pendent on it, I would have made mention of it." With winds like these blowing, the future did not look bright.

Now that this last problem had been rectified, President Baepler (president of the Synodical Conference) moved quickly to set up the first meeting date: May 18th. There was really no time to lose since the Norwegians, also members of the Synodical Conference and participating in the committee-work, had set their convention ^{time} for the June of that year. They, too, had resolved not to extend the life of the doctrinal committee beyond ^{the} convention.

And so the first session of the committee took place in Chicago. The doctrinal committee limited itself to a discussion of the Common Confession. The Wisconsin men were basically looking for Missouri to rescind it or in some definite way to repudiate it. Pastor O.J. Eckert expressed his attitude towards the matter as follows, "Will they permit this masterpiece of ambiguity and compromise to stand or will they disavow it?" (from a private letter). What follows is an attempt to reconstruct those first discussions on the basis of private letters and a report of Pastor E.H. Wendland to the Standing Committee on Church Union of the Wisconsin Synod.

The Wisconsin men renewed their long-standing contention that the Common Confession was totally inadequate as a settlement of past differences, even though it may not have contained false doctrine. Then Pastor Nickel of the Missouri Synod took the floor. His remarks were later described by Professor Meyer as "manifesting some very loose thinking. . . his arguments were full of fallacies (logical quaternios)." Pastor Nickel was willing to admit that "according to hindsight" various paragraphs of the Common Confession might have been formulated differently. Nevertheless, he did not want to repudiate it since it had been formulated "in good faith" and under different

circumstances than were then prevailing. Besides all of which there were "psychological reasons" why Missouri could not rescind the Confession. It would be too harsh a judgment on its formulators. Professor Meyer later dryly remarked, "'Psychological reasons' to me sounds very much like a scientific term for 'face-saving.'" Finally, Pastor Nickel stated that the Common Confession was a "dead duck" anyway, with the obvious implication, "It is silly, therefore, to continue to make such an issue of it."

Professor Bouman of the Missouri Synod was more sensitive to the concerns of the Wisconsin delegation. He proposed the following resolution in an effort to calm their fears, "Resolved that we go on record as explicitly repudiating every interpretation of any doctrinal statement that will permit anti-Scriptural teaching to take refuge and that we commend the preparation of a joint statement of faith in which all the members of the Synodical Conference will take part." (emphasis mine). We can see from this resolution that not even he was willing to go so far as to repudiate the Common Confession as a doctrinal settlement, but only false interpretations of it which might be made. The motion could not be properly discussed in that first meeting before the time came for adjournment. It was therefore tabled with the understanding that it would be discussed when the committee met again on June 15th.

The mood of the Wisconsin men after this first meeting was not too optimistic. We who have passed 24 years beyond that point might wonder if they were not just being stubborn in insisting that Missouri repudiate the Common Confession. Wasn't Bouman's motion enough? Did we have to have our pound of flesh, too? And yet it was not obstinacy which moved our men. It was rather a desire to uphold the truth and a fear of the consequences if the truth were not upheld. Professor Meyer expressed this motivation in a letter to Professor Bouman dated the day after the May 18th meeting:

Now I think that, though the CC be a dead duck, you should in the interest of the truth rescind it. If you do not bury the dead duck properly its stench will continue to plague your Synod; and if we acquiesce, the S.C. including our Synod, could not escape the baneful influence of the spiritual miasmas arising from the dead duck. . . We are deeply concerned about the S.C., not so much with regard to the organization as to its spirit, the willingness to submit to the Scriptures at all times and in every way, psychological reasons notwithstanding.

It was in this atmosphere of dissatisfaction that the doctrinal committee of '55 met for the second time on June 15th. By the noontime adjournment, the situation seemed to be "entirely hopeless", according to Pastor Eckert. Bouman's motion was found to be unacceptable and there was nothing at first to take its place. In the afternoon session, however, Professor Bente of the Missouri Synod offered a compromise motion. It still did not repudiate the Common Confession which, in fact, was not even mentioned. The Missouri ^{had} men [^] said that it would be impossible to arouse enough interest in their synod to get it to consider the Confession directly. Bente's solution, therefore, was to address the situation indirectly, by calling on the President of the Synodical Conference to request that the union committees of each synod jointly prepare a single document of antitheses which would reject the specific false doctrines at issue. This was to be done at once. The motion was unanimously passed. The text follows:

WHEREAS in consequence of the recent fellowship negotiations fears have been expressed that error may creep into the constituent synods of the Synodical Conference; therefore be it

RESOLVED that the Synodical Conference Committee on Doctrinal issues recommend to the President of the Synodical Conference that he immediately request the various synodical presidents to ask their Union committees at once--jointly--to draw up antitheses concerning those points which have caused apprehension in any of the constituent synods and be it further

RESOLVED that the Synodical Conference Committee on Doctrinal Issues request the President of the Synodical Conference to ask the chairman of the Missouri Synod Committee on Doctrinal Unity to take the initiative and call a meeting of the Union committees of the constituent synods for this purpose as soon as possible.

And with this accomplished, the committee of '55 adjourned for the last time.

The Aftermath

The unanimous passing of the above resolution was really the high point in the history of the committee. Shortly thereafter, the story takes a sad turn. It was not long before at least one Wisconsin member of the committee began to have second thoughts on what he had wrought. Thus the issue of the Common Confession and how to solve it was beginning to exert stresses and strains within the fellowship of the Wisconsin Synod itself.

Pastor O.J. Eckert at first expressed only doubts as to the wisdom of the resolution. He did this in a letter addressed to his fellow committeemen, dated June 17th. His doubts found their focal point in the resolution's abovementioned lack of any specific reference to the Common Confession. It did not ask the Missouri Synod to repudiate it as a settlement of past differences. Since the committee's original intention had been to work in that direction and to see if it could get the Synodical Conference to recommend such a course of action to Missouri, Pastor Eckert wondered whether they had failed as a committee in obtaining only this somewhat indirect approach to the problem.

He conceded, "It is more than we expected. . . the assurances given us . . . that we must get at our problem without delay were encouraging." But he went on to say, "We also know what happens when a resolution leaves the hands of a committee and comes to be carried out."

On the other hand, Pastor E.H. Wendland was a bit more optimistic as to the results of the committee-work. In his report to the Standing Committee on Church Union, he listed both the resolution's advantages and its disadvantages. Its advantages he considered to be 1. The fact that it placed the discussion of the controverted issues back into the hands of the proper committees, namely, the committees on Church Union, 2. The fact that it called for antithetical statements. A joint meeting to formulate such statements

would serve to answer the question of how far Missouri was still willing to go in defining its doctrinal position. 3. The fact that it went further than the former Synodical Conference resolution then on the books which merely requested that the Common Confession not be used as a 'functioning union document.' Among its disadvantages he, too, mentioned the lack of any specific mention of the Common Confession or any demand for its rescission. And yet in conclusion he offered the following opinion:

We do not wish to forget our situation in serving on this committee. . . we were serving on an interim basis and to await an answer to our charges. This motion was the answer. It was as far as the men of Missouri. . . were ready to go at this time. And it certainly indicated to us a step, at least, in the right direction, or, as someone else called it, a ray of hope. My own personal feeling is that a step of this kind should not be ignored.

Pastor Eckert's doubts subsequently developed into something more serious. On July 10th, he sent a letter addressed "to all those who were members of the Synodical Conference Committee on doctrinal issues." In it he formally retracted his support for the resolution they had passed, for the reasons mentioned earlier.

Professor Meyer was somewhat of a 'man in the middle'. On the one hand, he actually drew up some trial antitheses. These he sent to the other members of the interim committee under a covering letter dated July the 15th. Yet he seemed to lack any genuine enthusiasm for the project. He said that he had worked on them "since we do not know what may happen. . . and since conditions may indicate that something else than a break be done at present." In expressing himself further on the matter of breaking with Missouri, he said, "I personally think that the situation is ripe for the final step, but if others, while fully sharing the doctrinal stand of our Synod, feel that greater harm than good would be done by a present break, then I should not stubbornly insist on having my way." (It might be of passing historical in-

terest to note that while he did not mention by name the Common Confession in his proposed antitheses, he did reject verbatim quotations from it as "inadequate, and hence deceptive, settlements.")

The last letter which Pastor Eckert wrote to his Wisconsin committee-members before the convention of 1955 expressed his opinion that the time had definitely come to break with Missouri. Missouri had caused divisions and offenses. Now all that was left for the Wisconsin Synod to do was to act on the basis of those facts in accordance with the Word (Ro 16:17).

Concluding Notes

So ended the work of the doctrinal committee of '55: a true case of concordia discors. Missouri and Wisconsin were unable to play the same tune anymore. But what was sadder still, the harmony was beginning to turn flat within the Wisconsin Synod itself. As far as the Wisconsin members of the committee were concerned, the experience had left them divided in their opinions. One, Pastor Wendland, held an optimistic view over against the work that had been done. He felt it was a step in the right direction which ought not be ignored. Another, Pastor Eckert, rejected the work which had been done and felt that Wisconsin should break with Missouri. And as for Professor Meyer, while he personally thought that the time for the break had come, he was, nevertheless, willing to go along with those who felt otherwise. He was unenthusiastic about the results of the committee-work and yet he was willing to submit an initial draft of the antitheses which the committee had suggested. All in all, it was a clear indication of the sorry pass to which the old Synodical Conference had come when even committee-members who came from the same synod could not agree completely on one course of action.

There are, however, a few positive things which can be noted. The event certainly depicts for us three men united in their deep concern to preserve a genuine Scriptural unity between the Wisconsin and Missouri synods.

They agreed that this unity had to be based on a true consensus of Scriptural doctrine and practice and not on papered-over differences. To achieve this goal, all three men had been willing to put in many extra hours, even when it seemed that Missouri was not always taking the situation as seriously as it might have. Whatever the final outcome of the work of this interim committee, the entire effort showed that Wisconsin was not about to take that 'final step' in breaking off with Missouri hurriedly.

Postscript

The Wisconsin Synod's Standing Committee on Church Union did not recommend to the August convention that it adopt the resolution passed by the interim committee. In its report to Synod, the Standing Committee agreed with Pastor Eckert that, since Missouri had not repudiated the Common Confession as a settlement, the divisions and offenses caused by it remained. It is interesting to speculate whether the resolution of the interim committee had any effect upon the Synod's decision ^{at that same convention} to draw up its own confession of faith, complete with antitheses.

Bibliographic Information

The Quartalschrift references are chiefly to the 'News and Comments' sections at the end of each issue. These were particularly helpful, since they often printed in full the crucial documents and resolutions of the time. Besides these sources and the obligatory convention Proceedings, the following articles proved to be especially useful:

Joh. P. Meyer, "We Believe and Teach," Quartalschrift, XLVII (April 1950).

E. Reim, "What Constitutes False Doctrine?," Quartalschrift, LI (April 1954).

E. Reim, "As We See It--the Chicago Convention," The Northwestern Lutheran, XLI, #25 (December 12, 1954).

Then there is the hermeneutically-sealed file of private correspondence presently in the possession of Pastor E.H. Wendland.

Finally, two private copies of articles by E.H. Wendland. They are entitled:

1. "The Inadequacy of the Common Confession as a Settlement of Past Differences."

2. "Report to the Wisconsin Synod Standing Committee on Church Union On the Meetings of the Synodical Conference Committee on Doctrinal Matters."

The first can be found in the Proceedings of the '54 convention of the Synodical Conference. As for the second, I am unaware whether it exists in published form.