

# The Synodical Conference and Prayer Fellowship

By, John F. Brug

During the discussions that led up to the dissolution of the Synodical Conference a point of contention between representatives of the Wisconsin Synod and Missouri Synod was whether the Wisconsin position against joint prayer with false teachers was an innovation or was, in fact, the original position of the whole Synodical Conference. The Wisconsin representatives claimed that their position was simply a continuation of the Synodical Conference position and practice. Missouri's representatives claimed that its position and practice of allowing joint prayer with teachers with whom they were not in fellowship was that of Walther, though they admitted that some later Missourians had a position like that which WELS was advocating. This issue was pretty thoroughly thrashed out in the 50s and 60s but has been largely forgotten in the intervening generation. More recently the old claims of faithfulness to Walther have resurfaced in Missouri, in part as a result of the fallout over the Yankee Stadium prayer service.

In an essay published in the *Concordia Journal*, July 2003, Samuel H. Nafzger, executive secretary of the Missouri Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations, renewed the claim that the LCMS never held a unit concept of fellowship which included prayer on the same level as the means of grace as expressions of church fellowship, though he does grant that some in the LCMS may have had such a notion.<sup>1</sup> It is true that neither the Missouri Synod nor the Wisconsin Synod had a detailed official statement on this issue before the 1960s—there had been no need for one since there had been agreement between them on this question. The WELS, nevertheless, maintained that the teaching of a “unit concept,” which was finally incorporated in the WELS document “Church Fellowship” (1970), is simply a summary of a position and a practice that the LCMS and WELS had shared for most of their years in the Synodical Conference, a position which is documented by many public declarations in LCMS periodicals and publications.<sup>2</sup> Though there is little new evidence to be added to the debate which was not already set forth in the 50s and 60s,<sup>3</sup> it seems worthwhile to reassemble some of the evidence here in light of the renewed discussion within Missouri.

We will gather some of the evidence that prayer was always regarded as an expression of fellowship from the beginning of the Christian church through to the early days of the Synodical Conference. We will also note that those instances which Nafzger and previous spokesmen for the LCMS claim as evidence that the Missouri Synod did not have a unit concept of fellowship are, in fact, instances of the LCMS's dealing patiently with weak brothers, who were not yet shown to be persistent errorists. When it became clear that someone was a persistent errorist, no fellowship of any sort was practiced with him. The Wisconsin and Missouri synods were in agreement about this from the 1870s to the 1930s or 1940s when a shift occurred in the LCMS.

A review of the discussion is also useful for clarifying what the point of contention between the two synods actually was. Over the years, I have encountered numerous examples of LCMS members (and some WELS members) who had the impression that the big difference between WELS and LCMS was about praying with Grandma. This was not the issue (though it could become one if Grandma was a heretic). In reality, the disputed issue was (and is) whether it is right to pray and worship with persistent adherents of false teaching, teachers who publicly and persistently had rejected the scriptural doctrinal position of the Synodical Conference, such as leaders of the Ohio and Iowa Synods in 1904, of the old ALC in the 1930s, and of the ELCA today. To this question the LCMS and WELS formerly answered, “No, such prayer is not permitted.” Today the WELS still says “no.” The LCMS now says “yes” or “maybe.”

The historical aspect of the debate has focused on three historical situations: the claim that the apostles practiced prayer fellowship with Jews with whom they were not in fellowship, the claim that early Lutherans

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<sup>1</sup> Nafzger, p 245-246, 260.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper current acronyms like LCMS, WELS, and *WLQ* may be used even when they are anachronistic for the time period being discussed at that point of the study.

<sup>3</sup> See the tract “Fellowship Then and Now,” reproduced in Jahn, *Essays on Church Fellowship*, p 349-378, for a fuller presentation of evidence. More recent statements of the LCMS on fellowship have been dealt with previously in *WLQ* (e.g., Winter 2002, p 64-71; Fall 2000, p 302-305; Winter 1991, p 3-14; Summer 1992, p 217-221).

practiced prayer fellowship with the Catholics and Reformed, and the claim that Walther practiced prayer fellowship without doctrinal agreement in early free conferences. We will look at these in chronological order.

We recognize, of course, the danger that those looking for evidence in the past to support their present position are likely to find it, and that a clear perspective on past history can be blurred by selective use of the evidence. In this case, however, the two sides used basically the same events and texts as precedents for their position, so it is relatively easy for later students of the issue to form their own impression concerning the real significance of the past events. We also remember that historical precedents are only of secondary interest in evaluating this issue since Scripture alone has the right to determine our principles.

### **The Early Church**

In response to a request from the 1998 LCMS convention, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations with the Office of the President published “The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship.” This study was published in response to the growing misunderstanding of the application of church fellowship in the LCMS, particularly in regard to the practice of open communion.

The report’s opening statement anticipates its desire to eliminate or minimize the role of prayer as an expression of fellowship: “Though the word ‘fellowship’ describes a wide range of activities among Christians, this study concentrates on altar and pulpit fellowship.” The document concentrates on demonstrating that complete unity of doctrine is necessary for altar and pulpit fellowship. With this claim WELS fully agrees. The document, however, says that the church fellowship which requires full unity of doctrine is limited to altar and pulpit fellowship. Prayer fellowship is excluded, and the example of the New Testament church is cited as support for this distinction.

For some time after Christ’s resurrection Christians continued to pray with the Jews in their synagogues and the temple (Acts 2:46, 3:1, 21:26ff.) even though their leaders did not believe that Jesus was the Christ and had been raised from the dead (Matt. 28:11-15, Acts 4:1ff.). However, Holy Communion was not celebrated in the temple but only in the homes of Christians that served as their churches (Acts 4:26). Unbelieving Jews were excluded from the Sacrament. ... Agreement in the apostles’ doctrine was necessary for the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42). *Church fellowship is altar and pulpit fellowship in the New Testament.* [italics in original]<sup>4</sup>

Does the book of Acts actually support the commission’s claim that the apostolic church limited church fellowship to altar and pulpit fellowship and excluded prayer fellowship from its standards? All that is necessary to refute the commission’s contention that prayer fellowship is not included in church fellowship is to read Acts 2:42, the first passage which they cited: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” The breaking of bread, which the LCMS statement understands as the Lord’s Supper, is placed right next to prayer as an expression of fellowship.

The report’s citation of Acts 3:1 (the apostles went up to the temple at the time of prayer) indicates a misunderstanding of how worship took place in the temple courts as well as of the apostles’ purpose for going to the temple at the set times for prayer. In addition to the sacrifices and the associated rites which were conducted in the inner courts of the temple by the priests, there were many study and prayer groups meeting in various areas of the temple. One sees the same thing at the Western Wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem today. Many congregations are meeting simultaneously in the same area, some of which do not recognize the legitimacy of some of the others. Praying in the temple does not necessarily mean that the Christians would join together with Caiaphas and Annas and their supporters in prayer. How could they, when the Christians’ prayers were directed against the teachings and works of the leaders of Israel (Acts 4:23-31)? Far from leading to fellowship with the high priests, the activities which the apostles carried out in the temple led to their

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<sup>4</sup> Page 8 of the Adobe edition.

imprisonment (Acts 4:1-3, Acts 5:21). The main reason that the apostles were continuously in the temple at the hours of prayer, when crowds flocked to the temple, is stated clearly in Acts 5:42: they were there to preach Christ (if anything, it was pulpit fellowship not merely prayer fellowship that the apostles practiced in the temple). There is no evidence they went there to pray with Caiaphas.

There is another, perhaps more important factor involved in the relationship of the Christians to the temple and synagogue. These institutions had been the “orthodox churches” of that day. By rejecting Christ they became heterodox. The Christians’ first duty was to attempt to correct this error and to restore their straying brothers to the truth. On his missionary journeys Paul regularly stopped first at the synagogue. But when the synagogue rejected his message, he either was expelled or left the synagogue (Acts 13:42, 18:4-6). Sometimes members of the synagogue left with him (Acts 18:7). In leaving, Paul shook the dust off his feet as a protest against them (Acts 13:51) or even cursed them (Acts 18:6). Can this mean that he still prayed with them after they had rejected apostolic doctrine? Paul’s visit to the synagogue in Rome (Acts 28:17-28) illustrates the purpose and necessity of these visits. The synagogue at Rome was not fully informed about Christ, but they were at first willing to accept Paul’s instruction. Paul later separated from those who rejected his instruction. (The round of visits which WELS representatives made to overseas sister churches of WELS and Missouri after the breakup of the Synodical Conference to explain the reason for the division was similar in purpose to Paul’s effort to deal with his scattered brothers.)

When Paul was trying to win the members of the synagogue (that is, when he was still dealing with them as weak brothers), he not only prayed in the synagogues, he also preached and taught there (that is, he was still in pulpit fellowship with them). When they were shown to be persistent errorists, and when Paul was expelled from or left the synagogue, he had neither prayer nor pulpit fellowship with them. There is no evidence in Acts that the apostles separated prayer and pulpit fellowship or that they applied different standards for establishing or maintaining them.

The early Christians had a duty to try to win their erring brothers to the truth. When their testimony was heard and rejected, they separated from the persistent errorists. This same practice continued in the church. Luther and his followers were in a similar situation during the transitional period when they were separating from/being expelled from the Catholic Church. They recognized that they were no longer one with the church of Rome, but they attempted to win them to the truth. When their testimony was rejected, they realized they had to go their own way. The Wisconsin Synod was in a similar situation preceding the break with the LCMS. We recognized that the LCMS was heading in a different direction. For some 20 years we made a vigorous effort to gain a correction of the error. When it was clear that our testimony had been heard but rejected, we had to end our fellowship.

There is little separate treatment of the subject of prayer fellowship in the New Testament. Prayer as an expression of fellowship is simply treated as one element among many others. The early Christians devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42). However, there is nothing in Scripture to suggest that prayer should be treated any differently from any other expression of fellowship. Since God-pleasing prayer always flows from faith, every prayer is either an expression of faith (and therefore an act of worship), or it is an abomination. There is no middle ground. If true prayer is always an act of worship, joint prayer calls for the same unity of doctrine as any other act of worship. In some regards the issue of joint prayer is similar to the issue of infant baptism. Just as the command to baptize all nations includes children unless valid scriptural reasons can be cited for excluding them, the commands to keep away from false teachers and to have nothing to do with them certainly prohibit all expressions of fellowship with them, including prayer, unless there is an express scriptural basis for making exceptions. “Have nothing to do with them” and “keep away from them” can hardly mean “pray with them.”

Scripture offers other evidence for the distinction between false teachers and their victims whom we called “weak brothers” besides the examples which we find in Acts. Especially interesting is the wording found in Jude 17-23.

<sup>17</sup> But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ:<sup>18</sup> how they told you that there would be mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts.<sup>19</sup> These are sensual persons, who cause divisions, not having the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit,<sup>21</sup> keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. <sup>22</sup> And on some have compassion, *making a distinction*;<sup>23</sup> but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh. (NKJV)

Jude very sharply condemns the perpetrators of false teaching, the mockers who are causing divisions, but he shows compassion for their victims and urges his readers to make every effort to “snatch them from the fire.” Jude’s approach follows the example of Jesus, who sharply condemned the Sadducees and Pharisees, the misleaders of Israel, but who showed sympathy and patience for the misled.

In verse 22 the King James and those translations which follow it read the nominative διακρινομένοι, “making a distinction.” The NIV reads the accusative διακρινομένους, “those who doubt.”

<sup>22</sup> Be merciful to *those who doubt*; <sup>23</sup> snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

The accusative followed by the NIV does not make as sharp a differentiation between the false teachers and their victims as the nominative does, but in either case the text makes a distinction between the persistent errorists who are hardened in their ways and the weak and wavering, whom we work to rescue from the errorists’ grasp.

### **The Post-Apostolic Church**

There is clear evidence that the early church rejected prayer with false teachers. Although we cannot commend the fathers’ application of fellowship principles in all respects (slowness to restore the penitent, for example), it is clear that by and large the early fathers recognized that fellowship was a unit that included all expressions of faith including prayer.

If it be not possible to assemble either in the church or in a house, let every one by himself sing, and read, and pray, or two or three together. For “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Let not one of the faithful pray with a catechumen, no, not in the house: for it is not reasonable that he who is admitted should be polluted with one not admitted. Let not one of the godly pray with a heretic, no, not in the house. For “what fellowship has light with darkness?”<sup>5</sup>

Prayer with those who were not yet Christian, those who were separated from the orthodox church, and those under discipline was not permitted even in a private setting.

Further, if one of them has been suspended from prayer for some fault which he has committed, no one has any liberty of praying with him before he performs his penance on the ground, and reconciliation and pardon for his offense has been publicly granted to him by the abbot before all the brothers. For by a plan of this kind they separate and cut themselves off from fellowship with

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<sup>5</sup> *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, Bk. VIII, Sect IV, “At What Hours to Pray,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 7, p 1017. (Bk. p 496). The quotations from the fathers are taken from the Sage/Ages Computer Library edition of the Roberts/Donaldson and Schaff/Wace editions of the Ante-Nicene, Nicene, and Post-Nicene Fathers. The first page reference is to the computer edition, the second reference to the printed books. There has been some modernization of wording and punctuation.

him in prayer for this reason - because they believe that one who is suspended from prayer is, as the apostle says, “delivered unto Satan:” and if any one, moved by an ill-considered affection, dares to hold communion with him in prayer before he has been received by the elder, he makes himself partaker of his damnation, and delivers himself up of his own free will to Satan, to whom the other had been consigned for the correction of his guilt. And in this he fans into a more grievous offense because, by uniting with him in fellowship either in talk or in prayer, he gives him grounds for still greater arrogance, and only encourages and makes worse the obstinacy of the offender. For, by giving him a consolation that is only hurtful, he will make his heart still harder, and not let him humble himself for the fault for which he was excommunicated; and through this he will make him hold the elder’s rebuke as of no consequence, and harbor deceitful thoughts about satisfaction and absolution.<sup>6</sup>  
No one shall join in prayers with heretics or schismatics.<sup>7</sup>

The early church did not regard prayer as a practice requiring a lesser level of agreement for fellowship. The stance of the ante-Nicene church is summarized by Werner Elert in *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*:

There is either complete fellowship or none at all.

The schism between Bishop Miletius of Lycopolis and Peter of Alexandria came to a head in this that “the one party and the other prayed separately and likewise each performed the sacred ministrations for himself,” that is, by suspending prayer and sacrament fellowship.<sup>8</sup>

Though, overall, their practice was very rigid, the fathers did recognize that every case was not black and white. Augustine, the wisest of the church fathers, recognized “hard cases” for which he was reluctant to give advice, but he was unwilling use these hard cases to establish principles.

As to ordaining a man who was baptized in the Donatist sect, I cannot take the responsibility of recommending you to do this. It is one thing for you to do it if you are left without alternative; it is another thing for me to advise that you should do it.<sup>9</sup>

The fathers were concerned that dubious cases not be used to undermine the basic principles nor diminish the power of a clear testimony.

## **Reformation and Post Reformation**

The early Christians in Acts had a duty to try to win their erring brothers to the truth. When their testimony was heard and rejected, they separated from the persistent errorists. Luther and his followers were in a similar situation during the transitional period when they were separating from/being expelled from the Catholic Church. They recognized that they were no longer one with the church of Rome, but they attempted to win them to the truth. When their testimony was rejected, they realized they had to go their own way. They applied the same principles to their separation from the Reformed. There is considerable evidence that the unit concept of fellowship was understood by the reformers and by the confessors and by their successors in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Luther*

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<sup>6</sup> Cassian, *The Twelve Books of Coenobia*, Bk II, Ch 16, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, Vol. XI, p 435. (Bk. p 211).

<sup>7</sup> *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, Vol. XIV, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, p 149.

<sup>8</sup> Pages 164 and 167. German original: pages 136 and 138.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, “Letter 245,” 4<sup>th</sup> Group, *Post-Nicene Fathers I, Vol 1*, p 1197. (Bk. p 588).

Luther recognized the close connection between the means of grace and prayer.

By their nature, preaching and prayer are connected with each other. It is impossible to pray unless one has first instructed the people concerning God. In fact, you will never pray successfully in private unless you have preached to yourself either the Creed or some other passage of Scripture that draws your attention to the goodness of God as the One who has not only commanded you to pray but has also added the promise that He will hear you. Through this private sermon, which you direct to yourself, your heart is impelled to pray. The same thing takes place publicly in our churches. We have no silent forms of worship, but the voice of the Gospel is always heard. Through it men are taught about the will of God. And to the sermons we add prayers or thanksgivings. Similarly in 1 Cor. 14[:13] Paul desires that the churches should first be taught and exhorted. Then thanksgiving or prayer may properly follow. Zechariah (12:10) promises that the Lord will pour out the Spirit of grace and of supplication. It is the Spirit of grace who gives instruction concerning the will of God and incites men to faith by praising the mercy of God. The Spirit of prayer follows him, for those who know that God is reconciled and propitious call upon him in danger with a firm hope of deliverance. Thus preaching and prayer are always together.<sup>10</sup>

The example of Luther at the Marburg meeting with Zwingli and Bucer is often cited as setting a precedent for praying without doctrinal agreement. But it must be remembered that at the beginning of the meetings the Lutheran and Reformed churches had not yet divided. Both sides were still “withdrawing Catholics.” As long as Luther still regarded Zwingli as a weak brother, there were both preaching services and prayers attended by all parties. Already at the fourth session Luther told Bucer that he would not be able to regard him as a brother if he persisted in rejecting Luther’s biblical teaching. Nevertheless, Luther left the meeting thinking that it was possible to reach brotherly harmony also on the remaining unresolved article on the Lord’s Supper, since he thought Zwingli had yielded so much already and seemed open to further correction. Luther was soon disabused of this notion by Zwingli’s adherence to his error.<sup>11</sup>

#### *The orthodox*

The orthodox teachers who followed Luther held views very similar to Luther’s. Friedrich Balduin (1575-1627), professor at Wittenberg, wrote:

We should not confirm errorists in their error, which we do if we take part in their service. For in this way we give them the hope that finally we will come to agreement with them also in the remaining points. They will look upon our participation in their services as a sign that we thereby confess that we have separated from them without cause, since we in action approve of their worship.<sup>12</sup>

Johannes Andreas Quenstedt, one of the leading Lutheran theologians of the 17th century, said,

An orthodox man should either abstain entirely from the sacred rites of unbelievers and heretics (especially the papists) or if he at one time or another wishes to attend or is required by official

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<sup>10</sup> “Lectures on Genesis,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 2, p 333.

<sup>11</sup> Discussed in “Fellowship Then and Now,” as contained in *Essays on Church Fellowship*, p 374-376 and in H. Sasse, *This Is My Body*, p 218-219, 239, 265, 272-275, 278, 288-293.

<sup>12</sup> *Tract on cases of conscience*, II, 6, 7. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, p 64.

duties to attend, let him be careful not to give the appearance of secretly agreeing with them...but rather let him in some way, either by words or signs, make clear his disagreement.<sup>13</sup>

John Gerhard discusses the difference between persistent errorists (heretics) and weak brothers in the section of his dogmatics on “The Ecclesiastical Ministry”:

Not all who err with respect to the faith or the interpretation of Scripture are immediately heretics. For all heretics err with respect to the faith, but not all who err are immediately heretics, which Augustine, in the preface of the book *Concerning Heresies* to Quodvultdeus expresses thus: Not every error is a heresy, although no heresy, which has its foundation in corruption, could be a heresy without some error. And elsewhere he writes: Err I may, a heretic I will not be. So certain teachers of the church, in explaining certain sayings of the Scripture, erred from the proper and genuine sense, whom nevertheless we cannot at once place in the list of heretics, since in this life we “know in part and prophesy in part,” 1 Cor. 13:9. Consider Augustine . . . where he shows that it is one thing to miss the genuine sense of some passage, and another thing to depart from the rule of faith. Moreover some, with their error, do not impinge directly on the foundation of the faith itself, but, holding fast to the foundation of the church, which is Christ in His person and office, build on this foundation hay and stubble, 1 Cor. 3:11 ff., of which kind was the error of Cyprian concerning rebaptizing those who had been baptized by heretics, and the error of Augustine that infants should be given the eucharist, etc. To consider such at once heretics is by no means proper, since heretics seek a different foundation outside of Christ, while these build on the foundation the stubble of erroneous opinions. Some also number among the heretics those who in their faith cherish private errors, although they do not disseminate them, nor labor to draw others to their side. But although such err with great danger to their souls, nevertheless, speaking accurately and properly, they are not heretics, for these are described thus in Holy Scripture, that they come to seduce others, Matt. 7:15; that they come to the Lord’s sheepfold in order to steal, to hurt, and to destroy, John 10:10; that they stir up divisions and offenses, Rom. 16:17; that not only they themselves depart from the truth, but also subvert the faith of others, 2 Tim. 3:13; that they bring in damnable sects, 2 Peter 2:1; that they are deceivers, going out into the world and bringing in strange doctrines, 2 John 7, 10. Finally, unless there is added to error, which attacks the foundation, stubbornness it cannot yet be judged to be and to be called heresy in the proper sense. For this evil is to be sought neither wholly in the intellect, nor only in the will. For even as the true and saving faith embraces at the same time knowledge in the mind and assent and trust in the will, so heresy embraces at the same time error in the intellect, and, in the will, stubbornness. . . . Augustine says, 1.18, *De Civitate Dei*, c. 51: “Those in the Church of Christ who savor anything morbid and depraved, and, on being corrected that they may savor what is wholesome and right, contumaciously resist, and will not mend their pestiferous and deadly dogmas, but persist in defending them, are heretics.” On the other hand, as the same man writes (Epist. 162): “Those who maintain their own opinion, however false and perverted, without obstinate ill will, especially those who have not originated their own error by bold presumption, but received it from parents who had been led astray and had lapsed, those who seek truth with careful industry, ready to be corrected when they have found it, are by no means to be rated among heretics.”<sup>14</sup>

### *The Colloquy at Thorn*

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<sup>13</sup> *Theologia Didactico-Polemica*, Pt 4, Ch 11, Sec 2, Qu 8, p 382-392, esp 383b. Quoted in Hoenecke’s *Dogmatik*, III, p 441. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, p 64.

<sup>14</sup> *Loci Theologici* (ed. E. Preuss, Berlin, 1867), VI, p 261- 264.

During doctrinal talks between Lutherans, Reformed, and Catholic theologians held at Thorn (Torun), Poland, in 1654, each group held their own separate services before the sessions. Although the Reformed delegation was willing to join with the Catholics in opening and closing prayers since there was nothing offensive about the content of the prayers, the Lutheran delegation led by Johann Huelsemann and Abraham Calov refused to participate in these joint prayers. Since this incident has played a prominent role in the historical debate in the Synodical Conference, we will devote special attention to it.

In a recent issue of LOGIA (Easter 2004) Scott Murray claimed, “Our church fathers insisted on beginning with prayer when they participated in theological discussions with the Reformed and Roman Catholics in the seventeenth century. Only when the Catholics demanded to be the only ones to pray did the Lutheran party refuse to pray. More recently the so-called 10-10 meetings between ELCA and LCMS began with chapel in the respective national headquarters.”<sup>15</sup> Does Calov’s report of the colloquy permit such an interpretation? We will see that it does not.

But first, a brief summary of the conference. On August 28, 1645, the Polish king Ladislaus convened a religious conference at Thorn in the hope of bringing about religious unity in Poland. The meetings, optimistically called a “colloquium charitativum” (“loving consultation”) were attended by 26 Catholic, 28 Lutheran and 24 Calvinist theologians. Among the notables who attended were the Moravian educator John Amos Comenius and the Lutheran syncretist George Calixtus, who had already engaged in dialog with Catholics at Mainz. So strongly did Calixtus desire peace, that he was even willing to acknowledge that the pope was the supreme head of the church, as long as it was understood that his supremacy was the result of human arrangements, not a God-ordained appointment. The real Lutherans did not accept Calixtus as a member of their delegation. Like Calixtus, Ladislaus hoped for reunion of the church, but his wish was doomed to disappointment. Much of the colloquy consisted of separate caucuses of the groups. The Reformed entered upon separate meetings with the Catholics from which the Lutherans were excluded. Discussion continued until November, but by then it was apparent that no progress could be made. Reconciliation was out. On November 21, 1645, the negotiations ended in failure.<sup>16</sup>

At the Colloquy of Ratisbon (Regensburg) in 1601 Lutherans and Roman Catholics had taken turns providing the opening prayer.<sup>17</sup> It appears that the Lutherans expected that the same arrangement would be followed at Thorn. Upon arrival, however, they found that the Roman Catholics insisted that all opening services were to be conducted by Roman Catholics. The result was that the Lutherans refused to attend the opening service and prayed instead in a private meeting of their own. The LCMS interprets this as meaning that the Lutherans wanted to join in prayer with the Catholics but were refused. Calov’s explanation gives a very different picture. Among the reasons advanced by the Lutherans why they could not yield to the Roman Catholic demands in the matter of the prayers are the following:

1. The apostle *forbids* that anyone should have *fellowship with darkness* and the spiritual Babylon (2 Cor. 6; Rev. 18).
2. There is *nothing* in the royal invitation *about joint prayers* and ceremonies, rather that those who had left Roman Catholicism should be *distinct and separate*.
3. The royal invitation of Dec. 1, 1644, gives sacred guarantees that charity should be preserved among all. But parity is violated if we are hindered from reciting *our own prayers* and called, as it were, before a tribunal, with the prayers of the Roman Catholics thrust upon us.

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<sup>15</sup> LOGIA, 13-2, p 8.

<sup>16</sup> For brief accounts see *Herzogs Realencyklopaedie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche* (Leipzig, 1907), XIX, x. v., “Thorn, Religionsgespräch.” *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Baker Reprint 1977), XI, p 432-434.

<sup>17</sup> On Ratisbon (Regensburg) see LCMS *Theology of Fellowship*, Part II, Page 22, Footnote 46. It appears that the correct reference should be to Jacob Heilbronner (not Heinbronner), *Acta Colloquii Ratisbonensis*, p 25-27, 71, 102, 131, 170, 224, 350f. Page numbers in the German edition are the same. It does not appear the alternation of service leaders was a matter of joint worship but of equal rights to conduct public worship, especially in view of the fact that the Catholics sometimes include the *Ave Maria* in their turn, which the Lutherans hardly could join.



4. The colloquy is to be charitable; but it is a contradiction of charity to forbid those who have equal rights to conduct prayers *with their fellows*, to take away from them the *liberty to pray in public*. If we were to condescend to pray with the Roman Catholic gentlemen, we should sin against charity, by which we should give offense to the weak (Rom. 16).
5. Liberty has been granted three provinces of greater Prussia in the exercise of religion, according to the teachings of Holy Scripture and the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. Why should there not also be liberty of reciting prayers, as in our churches so also in a hall and in a public act of confession?
6. It militates against our protestation, in the preliminary conditions, which the Roman Catholic part has already confirmed.
7. It militates against our instructions, in which we are commanded to hold firmly and to *defend the equality of our side*.
8. It militates against our conscience, which forbids to harm the neighbor; our neighbor, who is related to our faith, *would be harmed if we were to pray together with Roman Catholics*.
9. We have been instructed to procure and do all things which could be conducive to avoiding schisms in our churches and to establish harmony instead, and to nourish harmony with the churches which are outside our realm with which we are joined in fellowship of faith. But *agreeing to pray jointly in public, will give cause for schism, disturb harmony, offend the other churches*, who will be surprised that we should be willing to have the liberty of praying taken away from us.
10. We confess Christ also in our prayers, therefore he who forbids us these, takes away from us the liberty of confessing Christ.
11. Our instructions prohibit us from accepting from the Roman Catholics even so much as the manner of conducting the colloquy; much less will it be right to accept from them the manner of praying.
12. A charitable colloquy ought not to have the power of a synod, or the power to compel. But to compel the party of the Augsburg Confession and to forbid them prayer in public, what, I ask, is this if not to exercise the power of a synod against it?

There follow additional reasons why the Lutherans believed they could not consent to pray with the Roman Catholic party. The Scriptures referred to are 2 Cor. 6:14-18 (Rev. 18); and Romans 16:17, 18.<sup>18</sup> As the italicized words indicate, the Lutherans had no desire to pray with the Catholics but flatly rejected the idea. What they objected to about the opening devotions was that the Catholics were granted the right to hold public services, but the Lutherans were denied the right to hold equal but separate services. The LCMS “Theology of Fellowship” admits that the Lutheran confessors of Thorn had the same practice concerning prayer fellowship and used the same proof passages to support it which the WELS was using 300 years later. They tried to claim, however, that the practice at Thorn was a departure from the practice of Luther, just as they tried to claim that the WELS position was a departure from Walther:

These passages do not appear to have been used by Luther and his co-workers in the manner in which they have often been used in our time: to forbid all work and worship with men with whom they are not wholly in accord doctrinally; nor are they so used in the Lutheran Confessions. John Gerhard, the great orthodox Lutheran dogmatician, whose celebrated *Loci Theologici* was first issued in 1620, makes no such use of these passages. We find him quoting Matt. 7:15; Rom. 16:17; Gal. 1:9; 1 John 4:1; and 2 John 10 to show that the church must guard against false teachers, and that laymen are capable of judging doctrine. Beyond this he draws no

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<sup>18</sup> From Calov’s *Historia Syncretistica*. The translation, ironically, is from the LCMS, “Theology of Fellowship,” p 29, where the work is called *Historica Syncretistica*.

deductions from these passages. According to the evidence from the history of the Lutheran Church these passages appear to have come into prominence, and to have been used much as they have been used in the history of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, about the time of the Colloquy of Thorn in Poland in 1645, when unsuccessful doctrinal discussions were conducted among Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed.<sup>19</sup>

It is hard to understand how LCMS sources can claim that the Lutherans of the 17th century “insisted on praying with the Catholics” when their own documents, even those which reject the WELS position, admit that the Lutherans at Thorn held the same practice defended by the WELS and used the same passages to support it. The interpretation and application of Thorn which I present in this article, so far as I can tell, originated in the Missouri Synod, not in the Wisconsin Synod. In connection with Missouri’s rejection of joint prayer at the free conferences with Ohio and Iowa in the early 1900s *Der Lutheraner* offered this evaluation of the events at Thorn:

From this we can see: 1. That we are following the same practice as the faithful Lutherans in the year 1645; 2. That this demand for public prayer with errorists and heretics is a characteristic of the Reformed, but is foreign to the true Lutheran church.’’<sup>20</sup>

### Walther and Early Missouri

Walther was the key figure in the development of the sound fellowship principles and practices which characterized the Synodical Conference. He and his associates and their counterparts in the Wisconsin Synod had to wrestle with a new situation which had not previously existed in Lutheranism—a confusing mix of orthodox and heterodox Lutheran churches in the same territory. After the free conferences of the 1850s and the Election Controversy of the 1880s had drawn a clear confessional line in American Lutheranism, the churches of the Synodical Conference practiced the “unit concept” of fellowship—agreement in all doctrine is necessary for any practice of fellowship, including joint prayer.

It is clear that the Wisconsin Synod and Missouri Synod have quite different interpretations of the significance of the Missouri’s Synod’s differing actions during the free conferences in the mid-nineteenth century and those in the early years of the twentieth century. From WELS’s point of view the difference of practice between the earlier and later sets of conferences was not because Missouri had developed a different view about the role of prayer as an expression of fellowship during the later free conferences than they had during the earlier conferences, but because they recognized that they were dealing with two different sorts of people. In the first instance, Walther was dealing with men who could be considered to be weak brothers searching for the truth. The early meetings were intended for sincere adherents of the Augsburg Confession. In the second instance, after the leaders of the predecessor bodies of the ALC had publicly and persistently condemned Walther’s teaching, they could no longer be considered weak brothers, and Missouri’s behavior toward them changed. WELS had no disagreement with this two-fold approach, having learned it, at least in part, from the Missouri Synod.

Throughout its early history the Missouri Synod rejected unionism of every sort. Walther’s Thesis XXI in *The Evangelical Lutheran Church* concludes, “The Ev. Lutheran Church rejects *all* fraternal and churchly fellowship with those who reject its confessions in whole or in part.” The LCMS constitution renounced “unionism and syncretism of *every description* such as . . . participating in heterodox tract and missionary activities.” This view was maintained well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *The Brief Statement* says, “We repudiate unionism, that is, church fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine.” Pieper says, “It is important to point

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<sup>19</sup> “Theology of Fellowship,” p 23-24.

<sup>20</sup> *Lutheraner*, 1908, p 111. Cited in “Fellowship Then and Now,” *Essays*, p 376. In references to *Der Lutheraner* and *Lehre und Wehre* and other German and Latin works I will give references to readily available English translations when possible. I have not always followed these available English translations verbatim.

out again and again that in all Scripture there is not a single text permitting a teacher to deviate from the Word of God or granting a child of God license to fraternize with a teacher who deviates from the Word of God.”

In contrast the late LCMS position is that Walther did not oppose prayer with false teachers and that the later rejection of joint prayer at free conferences with the successor synods of Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo was an unfortunate hardening of the Missouri position which they have since corrected.<sup>21</sup>

We will examine some of the specific incidents in the line of free conferences from the 1850s through the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which illustrate how Missouri practiced their principles of fellowship in differing circumstances.<sup>22</sup>

### *The Early Free Conferences*

Free conferences for individuals who “subscribed to the Augsburg Confession without reservation” were held for the purpose of discussing doctrine at Columbus, Ohio in 1856; at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1857; at Cleveland, Ohio in 1858; and at Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1859. Individual participants came from synods not in formal church fellowship. These free conferences were all opened and closed with prayer, and sometimes with a hymn and the Apostles Creed.<sup>23</sup>

What was the situation during these free conferences? In the 1850s a number of Lutheran synods were united in the General Synod, organized in 1820. The confessional stance of that body was, generally speaking, unionistic. In the General Synod’s constitution, the Lutheran Confessions were not even mentioned. The confessional position of the nominally Lutheran General Synod and of its constituent districts was, however, in flux and in confusion. Walther had sound reason for new-found optimism because many pastors in the General Synod had just rejected the Definite Platform, which would have effectively annulled the Augsburg Confession, and reaffirmed their adherence to that confession. For this reason, in 1856 Walther suggested the calling of free conferences of such Lutherans as subscribed to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession without reservation as to discuss the situation and to pave the way for a doctrinally united, truly Lutheran Church in North America. Encouraged by numerous favorable replies, he published an invitation, signed by himself and four other men from St. Louis. It read: “The *undersigned ministers* of the Ev. Luth. Church in the United States, with the conviction that the unity and the well-being of our Lutheran Zion will be greatly advanced through the free expression of opinions regarding the various interests of our church in this land by *brothers who are united in faith*, herewith extend an invitation to all members of the Ev. Luth. Church in the United States *who hold the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to be a true presentation of the teachings of the Word of God* to meet with them...in a free and brotherly conference concerning the status and needs of the church in America.”<sup>24</sup> The invitation was based on a wholehearted acceptance of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. Under the circumstances, wholehearted acceptance of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession showed a readiness to submit to the full truth of the Scriptures. The invitation was not extended to heterodox church bodies but was a general call for *individuals* who had taken a public stand as confessional Lutherans to step forth and to meet with their confessional brothers. As reported in *Der Lutheraner*: “This led to the question as to how we are to look upon those who indeed for themselves accept the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, but who belong to a church body that does not recognize the binding force of this confession as a symbol. ... This question was answered in this way, that we acknowledge such as brothers as long as they testify with vigor against the prevailing errors and for the truth. It was also stated that we consider it their duty to continue membership in their respective church bodies as long as there still is a basis for hope of improvement.”<sup>25</sup> Thus the fellowship expressed at the free

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<sup>21</sup> See Erwin Lueker, “Walther and the Free Lutheran Conferences,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XV, 8 (Aug., 1944), 537 f. and Erwin Lueker, ed., *Lutheran Cyclopedia* (Saint Louis, 1954), s. v., “Free Conferences,” p 390.

<sup>22</sup> This section for the most part follows the account given in “Fellowship Then and Now,” p 353-57. Additions are noted in separate notes.

<sup>23</sup> Lueker, *op cit.*, esp. *CTM*, p 543, 553, 556, 557, 559. References to the minutes as published in *Der Lutheraner* can be found in that article.

<sup>24</sup> *Lehre und Wehre*, 1856, p 186-187 – emphasis added. “Fellowship Then and Now,” p 354.

<sup>25</sup> *Lutheraner*, 1856, p 50. “Fellowship Then and Now,” p 355.

conferences was not with the unionistic General Synod, but with individuals who had stepped forward with a positive confession for the truth against the General Synod's laxness. Since the free conferences consisted of men who confessed unreserved acceptance of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, there was present a fundamental unity. Whatever errors one or the other may have held were a matter of weakness and not of persistence. To refuse joint prayer under such circumstances would, in Walther's view, have been a violation of brotherhood.

Walther explained his favorable impression of those in the General Synod who came forward with a clear confession:

This constellation [that is, the united front of those who proclaimed allegiance to the U.A.C.] certainly fills all who love the Lutheran Zion of this land with great joy and also with hope for the future. It has become evident that the number of those who do not bow, nor wish in the future to bow, their knee to the Baal of the so-called "development" and the so-called "higher enlightenment" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is without doubt greater than our feeble faith or despair had believed.<sup>26</sup>

Walther also displayed his concern for weak brothers. In response to the suggestion that all attendees must immediately subscribe to the whole Book of Concord Walther said:

As church conditions have been here in the last decades, and to some extent still are, there may well be many a genuine Lutheran who is loyal from the heart to the Augsburg Confession yet does not have a clear knowledge rightly to subscribe to the whole Concordia. Also such Lutherans are, without a doubt, our brothers. ... We believe that one of the most important duties of the conference would be just this, to remove the uncertainties from the minds of those brothers who still harbor scruples against the consequent unfolding of the doctrine confessed at Augsburg and by the grace of God to lead them to a blessed, happy conviction that the other symbols of our church are *implicite* contained in the Augustana, which they accept.<sup>27</sup>

### *Meetings With Buffalo and Iowa*

Later, colloquies were held between members of the Missouri Synod and members of the Buffalo Synod at Buffalo, NY in 1866, and between members of the Missouri Synod and of the Iowa Synod in Milwaukee, WI in 1867. The reports of both colloquies make mention of the devotional services with which all meetings were opened. At the Milwaukee Colloquy sessions were opened with a liturgical service by the *pastor loci*.<sup>28</sup>

The confessional position of these church bodies was in flux. Grabau, the opponent of Walther on church and ministry, had left the Buffalo Synod and the remnant was seeking reconciliation. The Buffalo Synod, now freed from Grabau's dictatorial ways, accepted the invitation of the Missouri Synod for a colloquy, stating that they wanted to do everything they could "with the gracious help of God to arrive at unity of doctrine and peace and reconciliation."<sup>29</sup> Under the circumstances, they could hardly be considered as such who were set and hardened in error. They were men whose doctrinal position was somewhat uncertain, but who were looking for the truth and willing to bow to the Word of God.

To understand the Missouri Synod's relationship toward the Iowa Synod at the colloquy of 1867, we must remember that in 1866 and 1867 the General Council was organized. Since the General Synod had continued in its unionism, the General Council was established to provide a spiritual home for Lutherans who held faithfully to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. However, the General Council also proved inadequate because it failed to take a clear and definite stand with regard to the so-called Four Points (Lodge Membership, Pulpit

<sup>26</sup> *Lehre und Wehre*, 1856, p 3-4. Lueker, p 533-534.

<sup>27</sup> *Lehre und Wehre*, 1856, 84-86. Lueker, p 535-536.

<sup>28</sup> J. P. Beyer, *Stenographisch Ausgezeichnetes Colloquium Vertreter der Synode*, 1868, p 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Lutheraner*, 1866, p 28. "Fellowship Then and Now," p 356.

Fellowship, Altar Fellowship, Millennialism). Among the synods which for this reason refused to join the General Council was the Iowa Synod. This showed that the Iowa Synod was serious about its acceptance of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. The Wisconsin Synod had at first joined the General Council, but then left it when its testimony against doctrinal compromise was not heeded. The dividing line separating the confessional from the non-confessional synods was the stand a body took with respect to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. There was a fundamental unity drawing these confessional bodies together, although clarity was often woefully lacking. Thus, when representatives of the Missouri and of the Iowa Synods met for a colloquy, the question was not, “Can unity be attained?” but, “Can unity, threatened by some error, be preserved?” The aim was to overcome the unclarity and to avert a breach. Since basic unity of confession, though threatened by error, was present between Missouri and Iowa, the session of the colloquy was opened with joint prayer. This was not joint prayer with representatives of bodies who were persistently adhering to an error.

Walther was dealing with a situation in which scriptural principles of church fellowship were almost totally unknown among the German immigrants who were being gathered into the congregations of the Missouri Synod and like-minded synods. In some cases he had to counsel indulgence of the weak for longer than we might advise today when confessional lines have been clearly drawn and ignorance is less excusable. We might not agree with his specific advice in every case, but we agree with both his strict principles and with his patient evangelical practice. Such patience, of course, at times leads to disappointment in the end, as was the case with Buffalo and Iowa. While the free conferences among Lutherans who subscribed to the Augsburg Confession without reservation did not succeed in uniting all the individuals and synods who were represented at the free conferences, they were instrumental in clearing the way for the organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America in 1872.

#### *The 1880s The Election Controversy*

In the 1880s Missouri refused to join in prayer with members of some of the same groups they had prayed with in the 1850s and 1860s. Why the difference? *Der Lutheraner* summarized the situation thus:

We say openly and honestly to everyone who brings different doctrine among us, even though he appeals to the confessions of the Lutheran church, “We do not belong together and so we must go our separate ways. By that we do not mean to say that our opponents are heretics nor do we anathematize them. We do not do that even of the Unionists and the Reformed. But this is what we say, “We can no longer walk together. We cannot pray with one another any longer. For you will pray for our conversion and we for yours. But such joint praying is an abomination in the sight of God.”<sup>30</sup>

The debate during the Election Controversy had made it clear that Missouri was no longer dealing with weak brothers but with persistent errorists. The lines had been drawn and fellowship was no longer possible. Note that this change took place during Walther’s lifetime.

#### *The Early 1900s Meetings with Ohio and Iowa*

During the early history of the Synodical Conference the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod agreed that unity of doctrine was a prerequisite for all forms of church fellowship, including joint prayer. They put this common conviction into practice at the free conferences held during the early 1900s to discuss doctrine with members of the Ohio and Iowa Synods, which were not in fellowship with the Synodical Conference. At these meetings the Synodical Conference participants, including representatives of the Missouri Synod, objected to joint prayer. Their position is spelled out in Gerhard Bente’s 1904 essay “Why Can’t We Establish and Maintain Common Prayer Services With Iowa and Ohio?”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Lutheraner*, July 1881, p 100. Missouri Synod Proceedings 1881, p 30. Schuetze, *Synodical Conference*, p 97.

<sup>31</sup> English translation: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file. Original: *Lehre und Wehre*, Vol. 51, 1905, p 49-53, 97-115.

The fact stands that the spokesmen of Ohio and Iowa cannot be considered as weak and needing our brotherly support. According to the Word of God we may differentiate carefully between the weak and those who may not be considered weak and therefore should not be treated as such. ... If someone errs through weakness or lack of insight, we would certainly not deny him all communion of faith and prayer. On the contrary—as long as an erring brother is obviously weak and recognizes himself as such, we would patiently support him and never deny him brotherly communion. ... But Iowans and Ohioans do not want to be considered as such weak brothers, and even if they did, we could not agree.<sup>32</sup>

Never has Luther shown greater and purer love than precisely in the situation where all historians accused him of callousness and lack of love, namely in 1529, when he replied to Zwingli's tears, "You have a different spirit from ours. We cannot practice brotherly communion with one another." This is the language of pure, holy love. And the love which we owe our adversaries consists mainly in testifying to the truth and not to encourage them in their errors. By granting them their request in Detroit we would have denied them this necessary love. ... We freely admit that our flesh is hard put to say "No" when we are tempted as we were at Detroit, since we know from past experience that such a "No" is the signal for many to attack the "pharisaic," "loveless," and "dogmatic" Missourians. But what is the use? God's true Word and the demands of true love must mean more to us than the world and the flesh and the smother-love of blind partiality, which respects neither God's Word nor the true well-being of one's fellowmen. Real communion between Missourians who are true to their convictions and true Ohioans is not only an immoral thing, but a dreadful abomination.<sup>33</sup>

To this one must add that logically the Synodical Conference could not have stopped at liturgical prayer services. The conference would have been pushed on inexorably, further than even Ohio and Iowa would have cared to go. Those who say "A" and conduct joint services must say "B" and institute joint sermons and the Lord's Supper. Whoever grants joint prayer to Ohio has given them the most intimate and deepest gift a Christian can give and cannot deny them any other form of brotherly relationship.<sup>34</sup>

Prayer fellowship and church fellowship have unity of faith as their prerequisite. ... Church fellowship in prayer and divine service should always follow unity of faith, never precede it. ... Prayer fellowship is church fellowship.<sup>35</sup>

It is hard to understand how anyone can deny that this is an explicit rejection of "levels of fellowship" and an assertion of the "unit concept." The Missouri Synod's abandonment of this position during the 1930s and 1940s was a significant factor in the disagreement which led to the dissolution of the Synodical Conference.

#### *1904 Free Conferences with the Michigan Synod*

A resolution adopted by the Cleveland convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in 1962 states: "In meeting with other Lutheran bodies (not in fellowship) for the purpose of discussing doctrine, joint prayer has been practiced in the early and in the present-day history of our Synod and of sister synods." Among the examples listed is a meeting with the Michigan Synod in 1904.<sup>36</sup> This example is cited to supply a precedent for the contention of the Missouri Synod that if church bodies meet to discuss doctrine, even though they are not yet united in doctrine and practice, the advisability of joint prayer at such a meeting is simply a matter of Christian judgment. Do the meetings held between Missouri Synod and Michigan Synod pastors in 1904

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<sup>32</sup> Bente, p 8, *Lehre und Wehre* 51, p 97-98.

<sup>33</sup> Bente, p 35, *Lehre und Wehre* 51, p 108-109.

<sup>34</sup> Bente, p 25, *Lehre und Wehre* 51, p 110.

<sup>35</sup> "Anticipation der Kirchengemeinschaft," *Lehre und Wehre*, 50, p 223-235. Summarized in Eckart *Reallexicon*, p 973. Bente's view was echoed by A. Pieper in the *WLQ*, July 1904, p 176.

<sup>36</sup> *Proceedings of the LCMS*, 1962, Resolution 3-28, p. 110.

actually constitute such a precedent for joint prayer without doctrinal agreement? The contemporary accounts fail to support drawing such a conclusion.<sup>37</sup>

The breach of fellowship between the Michigan Synod and the churches of the Synodical Conference was not a result of doctrinal differences but was due to disputes about the role of Michigan Lutheran Seminary and the resulting animosities.<sup>38</sup> Those participating in this free conference joined in worship only *after* the unanimous acceptance of the earnest admonition to reconciliation and *after* the conference essay had shown that all present were truly one in doctrine and practice. The group also authorized the publication of a pamphlet of the results of the meeting. This showed that they all meant to make their common position known and that they were determined to work toward having this position accepted throughout the Michigan Synod.

At the Intersynodical Free Conference at Detroit during April 6–8 of the same year, which was discussed in the preceding section, Synodical Conference participants had spoken out against opening the next free conference planned for Fort Wayne with joint prayer. They did so with the testimony that public joint prayer would be an expression of fellowship and thus would give the false impression that all present were united in a common faith and that the doctrinal differences which still obtained among the various participants were not of great significance.<sup>39</sup> The fact that Missouri Synod pastors closed the free conference at Jackson with men of the Michigan Synod with a joint devotion but the Missouri Synod pastors present at the Detroit conference with Ohio and Iowa opposed joint prayer does not reveal two different views of prayer fellowship within the Missouri Synod. Both instances reveal a conscientious and responsible application of the Synodical Conference’s scriptural position on church fellowship, which bears with weak brothers but avoids persistent errorists. The Michigan men were recognized as weak brothers. The Ohio and Iowa men were not. In both instances we have the kind of application which the Wisconsin Synod advocated in its “Theses on Church Fellowship,” rather than a mechanical application of rules.

These free conferences of 1904 with the Michigan Synod (closed but very advisedly not opened with joint worship) differ greatly from recent meetings of the LCMS and ELCA for whose joint devotions the meetings of 1904 are supposed to supply an approving precedent. The meetings of 1904 were true free conferences, meetings of individuals and not of official representatives of church bodies. The participants had a common concern of fostering the re-establishment of fellowship relations of the church bodies to which they belonged on the basis of full unity in doctrine and practice. They entered upon their discussions with the strong conviction that they were of one mind and spirit but nevertheless refrained from joining in worship until this unity had been fully established in the discussions, until provisions had been made to let their common position become generally known, and until measures had been set into motion by which their respective church bodies could be restored to official fellowship. Recent discussions between the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the ELCA, conducted in the framework of common devotions, have been meetings of official representatives of church bodies whose official confessional positions are at variance even on such a vital matter as the very nature of Scripture and between whom there is no reasonable hope for resolving the gulf of differences.

Let us not miss the most important truth that we can learn from the information which the accounts of the past give us concerning these free conferences of 1904. Faithful observance of the scriptural principles of church fellowship can and does foster confessional unity (the breach with Michigan was healed in 1910). For such faithful observance is essentially faithfulness to Scripture as God’s precious Word, and it flows out of a deep concern for God’s Word as our bread of life. Where this Word is truly treasured in faith, it can, as this historical survey reminds us, effect the humility that is necessary for those who have erred from scriptural doctrine or practice to correct their past mistakes, and likewise effect the humility that is needed for those who

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<sup>37</sup> Reports in *Der Lutheraner*: Nov. 8, 1904, p 355–357; Nov. 22, 1904, p 272–273; Dec. 20, 1904, p 87–88. Reports in the *Evangelisch-Lutherischer Synodal-Freund*, official organ of the Michigan Synod: Aug. 1904, pp. 87–88; June 1906, p 67. *Kurzgefasste Geschichte der Evangelisch Lutherischen Synode von Michigan u. a. St.*, p 41–52.

<sup>38</sup> For a brief summary see Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, p 102-105.

<sup>39</sup> *Lehre und Wehre*, April 1904, p 176.

have clung to scriptural doctrine and practice to speak the truth in love to the erring and to help them return to a common faithfulness in the gospel.<sup>40</sup>

It is worth noting that even after the dissolution of the Synodical Conference, WELS continued to follow the approach followed by Missouri in the 1904 Michigan free conferences. After a four-day meeting in Mequon, Wisconsin, July 17-20, 1973, led to a resolution of the doctrinal differences between WELS and SELK (Independent Ev. Lutheran Church in Germany) WELS and SELK representatives practiced fellowship with each other with a closing joint devotion and urged steps to establishment of formal church fellowship between their church bodies. In this case, however, there was not a happy ending to the story since SELK did not adhere to the agreement, and the church fellowship effort ultimately failed.<sup>41</sup> The incident is interesting, however, as an illustration of the way in which WELS continued the practices of the Synodical Conference even after the dissolution of the conference.

### *Other Synodical Conference Sources*

There are many Missouri Synod sources that demonstrate the “unit concept” of fellowship, including prayer fellowship, was the common, public position in Missouri well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many respected theologians state the point clearly.

District President Wegener: People who join in prayer must be of one mind, one faith, one hope, for joint prayer is an expression of a common faith. For that reason Christians cannot pray together with the heterodox.<sup>42</sup>

August L. Graebner: From the outset prayer fellowship has been common worship of God, and where common worship cannot be practiced, Christians are not to carry on prayer fellowship. Take note of it well: with whom they were of one mind and continued in the Apostles’ doctrine and in the breaking of bread, with whom they were united in hearing the Word of God and in the use of the sacraments, in the use of the means of grace, with those the first Christians also continued to observe prayer fellowship [Acts 2:42]. ... Prayer is a part of the divine worship.<sup>43</sup>

Theodore Engelder: The passages which prohibit pulpit fellowship and altar fellowship apply with equal force to prayer fellowship. Uniting with errorists in joint worship in general, and common prayer in particular, is not avoiding them, Rom. 16:17, but recognizing their position as God-pleasing, 2 John 10:11. Furthermore joint prayer like joint communion is the outward expression of inward fellowship. ... If we could fellowship the representatives of false teaching in uniting with them in prayer, we could consistently exchange pulpits with them and meet with them at a common altar.<sup>44</sup>

Textbooks which were used for decades in LCMS and WELS colleges and seminaries state unequivocally that prayer with errorists is forbidden.

Edward Koehler, River Forest teachers college: We may not pray together with heathen, thinking that, while they pray to their idol, we may pray to the true God. At whose altar we worship, his religion we confess. Nor may we join in prayer fellowship with those who “cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned,” Rom. 16:17.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> This section adapted from Carl Lawrenz, “The 1904 Free Conferences in Michigan,” Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file.

<sup>41</sup> Carl Lawrenz, “WELS Efforts at Confessional Fellowship with the German Lutheran Free Churches,” *WLQ*, January 1978, p 35-43. The discussion of the aftermath of this meeting continues in the April issue.

<sup>42</sup> *LCMS Southern District Proceedings, 1895*, p 97. “Fellowship Then and Now,” p 364.

<sup>43</sup> *Nebraska District Proceedings, 1903*, p 74. “Fellowship Then and Now,” p 364.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in the *Confessional Lutheran*, Feb. 1946, p 18-19 and in “Fellowship Then and Now,” p 366. The *Confessional Lutheran* has a good treatment of the traditional Missouri position.

<sup>45</sup> *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, p 170. Koehler’s version of Luther’s Small Catechism takes the same approach, p 150-153, 172.



John Fritz, dean of Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis: Also any religious exercises (prayer, religious address or sermon, religious hymns) in connection with school commencements, so-called baccalaureate services, and the like, or religious exercises of any kind in connection with political meetings, or other meetings of civic bodies, whenever members of different denominations take part is unionism.<sup>46</sup>

In these feelings about civic prayer Fritz merely echoed Walther's dismay at the abuse of such prayer:

We hope that the increasing number of such examples of the base misuse of prayer for outbursts of horrible political fanaticism will have this effect that especially the Christian-minded members will vote for the abolition of this abominable prayer babbling from the meetings of Congress and the state legislatures.<sup>47</sup>

Wisconsin Synod sources simply echo the point about prayer that Missouri had clearly stated.

Joint prayer, praying with someone, is always an act of Christian fellowship even as it is always an act of Christian fellowship to go to Holy Communion together at the same altar. Of a handshake I may say: This handshake as you are installed as pastor is an expression of our unity of faith and is an act of Christian fellowship. Another handshake may be a mere friendly greeting with no religious fellowship implications. When we pray together, however, we cannot say: This prayer is nothing more than an act of friendship. The fact is that joint prayer always has religious implications, simply because prayer always is, or should be, a religious action.<sup>48</sup>

### **Contemporary Missouri**

In 1981 the LCMS's Commission on Theology and Church Relations stated their rejection of the unit concept of church fellowship in favor of a "levels of fellowship" approach:

There is the problem of terminology and levels of agreement. Through the use of the word "fellowship" almost exclusively to refer to a formal altar and pulpit fellowship relationship established between two church bodies on the basis of agreement in the confession of the faith, some have been given the impression that no fellowship relationship other than spiritual unity in the body of Christ can or should exist among members of Christian churches not in altar and pulpit fellowship. The fact that the LCMS is closer doctrinally to a church body which at least formally accepts the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions than to those denominations which do not is often obscured by the "all or nothing" approach that frequently accompanies ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship.<sup>49</sup>

This departure from the synod's former view had formed and solidified over a period of 50 years.

#### *The Change*

The first stirrings of change occurred already in the 1920s.

An LCMS missionary in India, Adolph Brux, had written a lengthy essay defending his practice of prayer fellowship with missionaries in India who were not in fellowship with the Missouri Synod. Brux claimed that such Bible passages as Romans 16:17 did not apply to fellowship between Christians and that prayer fellowship

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<sup>46</sup> *Pastoral Theology*, 1932, p 224f. "Fellowship Then and Now," p 372.

<sup>47</sup> "Gebets Greuel," *Lehre und Wehre*, 1878, p 119. "Fellowship Then and Now," p 372.

<sup>48</sup> Armin Schuetze, *WLQ*, Spring 1996, p 123.

<sup>49</sup> "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship," found at: <http://www.lcms.org> in the collection of CTCR documents.

may be practiced with all Christians. His fellow missionaries in India did not agree with his position, and his case was brought before the mission board. Brux was suspended from his call, but the dispute dragged on for many years. In the mid-30s two Missouri Synod conventions sought to resolve the controversy by allowing Brux to be restored to his position if he withdrew charges of false doctrine against the Missouri Synod. These ambiguous settlement attempts failed because Brux maintained that he had not retracted his views which were clearly contrary to the previous practice of the Missouri Synod. Brux ultimately resigned from the Missouri Synod. The irony was that within a few years Brux's position was accepted by the LCMS, and two leading LCMS theologians who had played a role in the rejection of Brux's position played significant roles in LCMS's shift toward the Brux position (William Arndt and Theodore Graebner).

The erosion of Missouri's position on prayer fellowship became more public after WELS objected to joint prayer between representatives of the LCMS and ALC during their fellowship negotiations. At first the LCMS reaffirmed its position opposing joint prayer without doctrinal agreement. In 1940 the Missouri Synod declared, "Ordinarily, prayer fellowship involves church fellowship." The ALC responded, "We are convinced that prayer fellowship is wider than church fellowship, but we do not consider this difference as church-divisive."<sup>50</sup> The 1941 and 1944 conventions of the Missouri Synod declared that no altar, pulpit, or prayer fellowship had been declared with the ALC and that none should be practiced by individuals or congregations of the synod, but the 1944 Missouri Synod convention undermined this resolution when it also resolved that joint prayer at intersynodical conferences does not violate the earlier resolution against joint prayer provided that such prayer does not imply denial of truth or support of error.<sup>51</sup> Although the resolution tried to limit the circumstances in which such prayer was allowed, the Missouri Synod had in effect adopted the ALC's position on prayer fellowship by its distinction between "prayer fellowship" and "joint prayer." This was a crucial turning point. In the early 1940s LCMS President Behnken continued to disavow joint prayers with the American Lutheran Conference and National Lutheran Council, as the traditional Missouri practice had been,<sup>52</sup> but Brux's position, which the LCMS had rejected only ten years before, was now the position of the LCMS. Although this resolution was intended to have a limited effect, it was an omen of things to come, and it yielded its fruit in the "Statement of the Forty-Four" published in 1945:

Any two or more Christians may pray together to the Triune God in the name of Jesus Christ if the purpose for which they meet and pray is right according to the Word of God. This obviously includes meetings of groups called for the purpose of discussing doctrinal differences.<sup>53</sup>

This statement was the wave of the future for the Missouri Synod.

After two decades of debate, the discussions between the Wisconsin Synod and the ELS on the one side and the Missouri Synod on the other reached an impasse.<sup>54</sup> The Wisconsin Synod maintained: "There is only complete fellowship or none at all. The same Scriptural principles cover every manifestation of a common faith."<sup>55</sup> The Missouri Synod position was that some expressions of fellowship, such as joint prayer, are not determined by these scriptural principles, so the propriety of joint prayer must be based on a consideration of the situation in which such prayer is offered, the character of the prayer itself, its purpose, and its probable effect on those who unite in the prayer.<sup>56</sup> The Wisconsin Synod broke fellowship with Missouri in 1961, and the Synodical Conference was in effect dissolved in 1963 by the withdrawal of the ELS and the Wisconsin Synod.

### **The Difference Remains**

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<sup>50</sup> Both quotes in Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity*, p 40.

<sup>51</sup> Wolf, p 428.

<sup>52</sup> Schuetze, *Synodical Conference*, p 287-288.

<sup>53</sup> *SOTFF*, Point 8. The text is available in *WLQ*, 1946, p 56-61.

<sup>54</sup> For summaries see Brug, *Church Fellowship*, p 67-87 and Schuetze, *Synodical Conference*, p 229-373.

<sup>55</sup> See "Statement On Fellowship," Part B.

<sup>56</sup> See "Theology of Fellowship," II.

The Missouri Synod has not made any progress toward returning to its former scriptural position of requiring agreement in all doctrines of Scripture as the prerequisite for all expressions of church fellowship. After the demise of the Synodical Conference, Missouri held a relationship that expressed a limited fellowship with the ALC and LCA in LCUSA. Missouri's relations with LCUSA ceased to exist when the ALC and LCA merged into ELCA in 1988, but the LCMS continues in a limited fellowship relationship of sorts with the ELCA, which is similar to the relationship which existed under LCUSA. Theologians and leaders of the Missouri Synod still join in joint prayer and devotions with theologians and leaders of the ELCA in spite of the major doctrinal differences which separate them.

Earlier sections of this essay have already incorporated some recent LCMS rejections of the unit concept which it formerly held. Only one additional example will be added here from "Theology of Fellowship."

3. Our Synod should understand that, in the case of doctrinal discussions carried on with a view to achieving doctrinal unity, Christians not only *may* but *should* join in fervent prayer that God would guide and bless the discussions, trusting in Christ's promise Matt. 18:19: "Again, I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them by My Father which is in heaven." The opening prayer on such an occasion should be suited to the specific situation. If all parties meet in an atmosphere of mutual confidence, there will be no problem. In a tense or an uncertain situation it may be suggested that the conference use the great hymns and liturgical prayers of the church, as was done at the Colloquy at Ratisbon where representatives of the two sides changed off opening the sessions with the "Veni Creator Spiritus" (Come, Holy Spirit) and the "Pater noster" (Our Father); and as did the fathers of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, when at the Milwaukee Colloquy the local pastor opened every session with a liturgical service.

4. Our Synod should clearly recognize that, in the case of necessary work on the local, national, or international level, where the faith and confession of the church are not compromised, and where it appears essential that the churches of various denominations should cooperate or at least not work at cross purposes, our churches ought to cooperate willingly to the extent that the Word of God and conscience will allow.

5. In the many cases which do not seem to fall readily under the guidelines enunciated above (e.g., prayers at all kinds of meetings), every Christian should for his own person observe the apostle's injunction, "Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind" Rom. 14:15; and his warning, "He who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). With respect to his brother, whose conscience may not judge in all such matters as does his own, let every Christian observe the instruction of the same apostle, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or, why do you despise your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. . . . So each of us shall give account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:10, 12).<sup>57</sup>

This statement is clearly intended to be a public rejection of the "unit concept" of church fellowship advocated by WELS and formerly held by Missouri. This statement and other Missouri documents advocate the position that although complete doctrinal agreement is needed for formal altar and pulpit fellowship, it is not necessary for other expressions of fellowship such as joint prayer. That this is indeed the intention of the statement is indicated by subsequent actions of the leadership of the Missouri Synod.

The official Missouri Synod policy is "no altar and pulpit fellowship without doctrinal agreement, but fellowship in 'externals.'" The LCMS's tendency toward artificial distinctions, such as distinguishing between "prayer fellowship" and "joint prayer" appears to have gotten worse rather than better, as can be seen in the practice of distinguishing between "worship services" which require full fellowship and "convocations" or

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<sup>57</sup> "Theology of Fellowship," p 27-28.

“rallies” which do not, even if they include many elements of worship. In 1983 the Missouri Synod’s Council of Presidents approved a set of guidelines on joint worship. This document requires all members of the Missouri Synod to practice joint worship only with those with whom the LCMS has declared pulpit and altar fellowship. They may, however, participate in joint celebrations, concerts, convocations, rallies, and conferences, if there is no sermon or sacrament and the clergy are not dressed in vestments. Among the valid reasons for such events are thanksgiving for the doctrinal heritage of Lutheranism, prayer for greater doctrinal unity, and encouragement of appropriate co-operative efforts in externals.<sup>58</sup> This distinction cannot be justified since thanksgiving, prayer, and encouragement are certainly expressions of faith and fellowship. To make matters worse, the document appeals to synod positions and policies, rather than to Scripture. Thus, there is no evidence that official Missouri is ready to deal seriously with the differences on fellowship principles which continue to separate our synods.

This fellowship practice of the LCMS has been called “levels of fellowship” or “degrees of fellowship” since it does not require complete agreement in all doctrine for all expressions of fellowship, but requires only different levels or degrees of doctrinal agreement for different levels of fellowship activity. In a paper presented to representatives of the Lutheran World Federation President Bohlmann expressed it this way, “Complete agreement on confessional doctrine is neither possible nor necessary for every inter-Christian and inter-denominational action. Expressions of Christian unity should be proportionate to the measure of consensus in confessing the Biblical Gospel we enjoy with the Christians involved. Although this point has seldom been articulated in official synodical documents, it has in fact been practiced by the Missouri Synod for many years.”<sup>59</sup> In a video designed to promote the “levels of fellowship” concept in the LCMS President Bohlmann condemned the Wisconsin Synod by name.

There are still some concerned voices speaking out in the Missouri Synod. In 1983 and 1995, for example, the LCMS convention reaffirmed the synod’s opposition to open communion (though some openly opposed the resolutions). Some of the authors in a collection of essays published by Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 2003 raised the question of stronger standards in the practice of prayer fellowship.<sup>60</sup> In a brief editorial in *Concordia Journal* entitled, “Civil Interfaith Religious Events: Maximal Hazards, Minimal Opportunities,” David O. Berger asks, “What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? ...between the temple of God and idols?” Such services do not allow Christians to proclaim the *exclusive* nature of Christianity and give the impression that all religions are worshipping the same God.” Berger maintains, “The most common public perceptions at such events—despite the good intentions of the Christian or his well-meant words—are that: a) all participants have an equally valid ‘prayer path’ to God. b) tolerance of each other’s beliefs is more important than the truth.” Berger concludes, “‘Visibility in the marketplace of religions’ is not a Biblical concept. The hazards are simply far too many and too great. ...The Scriptures, Old and New Testaments alike, are unambiguous regarding interfaith relationships that involve worship or prayer. Sophisticated judgment is rarely required. *The Bottom Line for Christian: KIS (Keep It Scriptural)*.”<sup>61</sup>

But such voices are few and muted. Even Al Barry, recent president of the LCMS, who was elected at least in part because of his conservative position and who spoke in defense of closed communion, defended the LCMS distinction between joint prayer and prayer, apparently upon the basis of the CTCR’s claims about Walther’s practices.

Humanly speaking, it does not appear likely that Missouri will return to the position on fellowship which we once shared with them in the Synodical Conference, either in theory or in practice. There are no signs that those who practice open communion will be disciplined or that stronger practices will be established concerning

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<sup>58</sup> “The Missouri Synod and Joint Worship,” p 4-5.

<sup>59</sup> “Inter-Christian Relationships: Missouri and Her Partners.” Quoted in *WLQ*, 1988, p 267.

<sup>60</sup> John Johnson, ed., *Witness and Worship in Pluralistic America*, e.g., p 52 ff.

<sup>61</sup> *Concordia Journal*, July 2004, p 118-121. Emphasis his.

See also Joel Brondos, “Christian Compassion and Civic Prayer,” <http://www.scholia.net/>.

prayer fellowship. The situation certainly cannot be expected to improve under the current president who approved the notorious Yankee Stadium prayer service.

### **Weak Brothers**

We close with a few citations which show that the Wisconsin Synod has always shared Walther's concern for weak brothers. Just as there was agreement concerning the unit concept, so there was agreement on this point. The basic principle is that we cannot practice any form of fellowship with a persistent errorist. We can practice fellowship only with those who confess the whole truth. But how do we determine a person's confession?

Normally our fellowship relations with a person are determined by whether or not we are in fellowship with his or her church. But is church membership the only evidence which we consider in all such decisions?

A semi-official response which the WELS has made to this question is the statement adopted by our CICR and the Doctrinal Committee of the ELS in response to questions from the Conference of Authentic Lutherans:

*Do we hold that the exercise of church fellowship, especially prayer and altar fellowship, can be decided in every instance solely on the basis of formal church membership, that is, on whether or not the person belongs to a congregation or synod in affiliation with us?*

No. Ordinarily this is the basis on which such a question is decided since church fellowship is exercised on the basis of one's confession to the pure Marks of the Church, and ordinarily we express our confession by our church membership. There may be cases in the exercise of church fellowship where a person's informal confession of faith must also be considered. This is especially true regarding the weak. But whether one is guided by a person's formal or informal confession of faith, in either instance it must in principle be a confession to the full truth of God's Word. In addition, special care must be exercised so as not to cause offense to others or to interfere with another man's ministry. Further, we are not to judge harshly concerning the manner in which a brother pastor after much agonizing handles such difficult cases.<sup>62</sup>

A tract on prayer fellowship published by the WELS Conference of Presidents when our controversy with Missouri was reaching its height made these observations about the application of the principles of prayer fellowship in special circumstances:

#### *Circumstances Vary, Principles Don't*

Those who advocate joint prayer between representatives of Lutheran synods that are not doctrinally one will not be able to obtain clear credentials for their practice. But does this rule out every joint prayer with members of a heterodox synod? Before answering that question, we must remind ourselves that on all occasions where Christians associate with one another, whether in public or in private, whether as synodical representatives or as individuals, the same scriptural principles apply.

What these principles are, this tract has set forth, namely, that it is always the will of God for his believers (a) to manifest in worship and in prayer the fellowship of faith that unites them (Ac 2:42; Eph 5:18-20) until and unless (b) confession of the truth and rejection of error require them to separate (2 Jn 10). These are not legalistic rules but evangelical principles. They are to be applied in the spirit of our Savior, who would not break a bruised reed nor quench a smoking flax. In both these principles, that of fellowship and that of separation, there is inherent the spirit of love and true concern for the spiritual welfare of others. In any given instance, we must do

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<sup>62</sup> *Report to the Ten Districts*, 1976, p 78-79.

whatever the glory of our Savior and the true edification of the other person may require. This may direct us to join in prayer with others or to refuse to pray with them.

Now we know that there are devout children of God in all synods who unfortunately are not yet informed regarding the matters in controversy and are not aware of their involvement in error through membership in a heterodox synod. I may have an ALC grandmother who has always manifested a simple, childlike faith in her Lord and Savior but who nevertheless is unaware of the intersynodical differences and their implications. When I visit her in the privacy of her home, it might be a grave mistake were I to assert the principle of separation by refusing to pray with her under such circumstances.

What would the Lord have me do? Should I trouble her simple faith with these matters, which are apparently beyond her grasp? Or is it not my plain duty to support and build up her faith by praying with her or otherwise expressing my own faith?

If, however, my cousin is not only aware of the synodical differences but defends his church's errors, I cannot pray with him—not even in the privacy of his home. In order to make clear to him that the error he defends destroys the unity of our faith, I must refuse to join with him in prayer. In cases of this kind, it matters not how close the other person may be to me as a relative or friend; here the word of Jesus applies: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Mt 10:37).

There may be more occasions where prayer together with other Lutheran Christians or even with Christians of other denominations is indicated—in the hospital, for example, at the scene of an accident, or on the battlefield. When peril and imminent death reduce a Christian's confession to no more than a gasping, "Lord Jesus, help me," we pray with that soul in his desperate need, even if he is not a member of our church body. When we stand in the presence of God, one in the awareness of our guilt and one in our complete trust in his saving love, we can unite in prayer as we could have united with the thief on the cross in his simple plea, "Lord, remember me." Let us only be careful that we do not even then compromise the truth nor sanction error.

Finally, we dare not forget that there are those Christians who may be caught in an error, not willfully, but because their understanding of Scripture is insufficient. They are willing to bow to Scripture, but as yet, through human weakness, do not see clearly how the truth of Scripture necessarily rules out their error. What does God say to us concerning such weak Christians? He tells us, "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations" (Ro 14:1). *Receive*, he says; *receive* such a weak brother and tenderly help him to overcome his weakness. "Receiving" such a weak Christian means that praying with him may well be in place and God-pleasing, and we trust that God will help him to grow in knowledge and strength. Certainly, this could not be done publicly without offense. And if such a person were to defend the error, even privately, then prayer with him would again be a denial of the Lord.

If we let these two principles guide us, that we manifest our Christian fellowship until confession of the truth and rejection of error require us to separate, then these concrete examples will not represent a policy of exceptions, but will constitute a truly biblical and evangelical practice.<sup>63</sup>

Unofficial publications have often stated the same principle.

It is the public confession of their church that governs our public fellowship relationships with our family or friends. ... In our private relationships with them, we may also consider their personal confession. For example, if they are dissenting members of a heterodox Lutheran church, who object to its false teaching and are fighting against it, we may recognize them as one in faith with us in our private relationships with them. We will encourage them to battle for the

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<sup>63</sup> WELS COP, "Prayer Fellowship," 1953, in Jahn, p 392-393.

truth, but we will also warn them that they must leave that false church if their admonition is rejected. The private confession of faith they make to us and the public confession they are making by their church membership are in contradiction, and they must take steps to bring them into harmony. If they are unaware of the unscriptural beliefs or practices of their church and, thus, are not knowingly adherents of false doctrine, we will urge them to become accurately informed about the teachings and activities of their church, which they are supporting by their offerings. Here too they should take steps to remove the compromise from their confession.<sup>64</sup>

An unsigned set of theses on prayer fellowship, dated to about 1948, from the fellowship files of John Meyer make the following statement.

- 18e. We have, therefore, no Scriptural authority for the legitimacy of prayer fellowship with such as are not in doctrinal and confessional agreement with us. According to Scripture, as shown above, prayer fellowship invariably implies fellowship in faith and in doctrine; and prayer fellowship with members of other church bodies is clearly prohibited in the Word of God, as long as the issues have been raised and are being upheld by those in error.
19. Prayer fellowship with representative groups of the A.L.C. and the A.L.Cf. is permissible at present only
  - a. when the individual or the group is clearly *in statu confessionis* over against the wrong teaching and practice within the group of which he or it is a corporate member.
  - b. When the individual or the group comes as a searcher for the truth, not as a contender for any false doctrine or anti-Scriptural position.<sup>65</sup>

We observe that even in the midst of the controversy with Missouri when there was valid reason for the fear that Missouri would try to justify lax practice as “exceptions to the rule,” our theological leaders clearly maintained the necessity of allowing for exceptional cases, which call for a departure from normal practice.

WELS has always agreed with Missouri that there are certain situations in which it is appropriate to pray with Christians who have not yet left false-believing churches. We, however, do not believe that meetings with theologians of a heterodox church who have publicly and persistently taken a stand against the teachings of Scripture (as was true of ALC leaders in the 1930s or ELCA theologians today) or syncretistic events like the Yankee stadium prayer service are among those circumstances. To pray together in such circumstances, we are convinced, is a violation of the scriptural principles of Christian fellowship. The heart of the disagreement between WELS and LCMS was not about prayer with Grandma. It was about joining in prayer with religious leaders who were publicly and persistently adhering to false doctrine. This disagreement was the chief reason for the dissolution of the Synodical Conference, and sadly, the gap on this issue seems to be as wide as it was 40 years ago, or perhaps wider.

### **Love and Truth**

Luther comments on how to show true love in matters of doctrine and fellowship.

But what good is achieved in the end if you praise and stress Christian love and other virtues and meanwhile destroy the faith? (*Luther's Works*, vol. 22, p. 22)

This is so great a good that no human heart can grasp it (therefore it necessitates such a great and hard fight). It must not be treated lightly, as the world maintains and many people who do not understand, saying we should not fight so hard about an article and thus trample on Christian love; rather, although we err on one small point, we agree on everything else, we should give in

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<sup>64</sup> Brug, p 147-148.

<sup>65</sup> This interesting document is unsigned. If it is not by John Meyer, it may be by P.E. Kretzmann since other documents which Prof. Meyer had received from him were found in this folder.

and overlook the difference in order to preserve brotherly and Christian unity and fellowship. No, my dear man, do not recommend to me peace and unity when thereby God's Word is lost, for then eternal life and everything else would be lost. In this matter there can be no yielding nor giving way, no, not for love of you or any other person, but everything must yield to the Word, whether it be friend or foe. The Word was given unto us for eternal life and not to further outward peace and unity. The Word and doctrine will create Christian unity or fellowship. Where they reign all else will follow. Where they are not, no concord will ever abide. Therefore do not talk to me about love and friendship, if that means breaking with the Word, or the faith, for the Gospel does not say love brings eternal life, God's grace, and all heavenly treasures, but the Word.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *Sermons from the year 1531, W.A- 34-11- 387. Day By Day We Magnify Thee*, p. 384.



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