

WELS FELLOWSHIP PRACTICES IN 1869 AND 1961

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Why is it that the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod waited for about eight years before severing fellowship with the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod when it took the Wisconsin Synod only a matter of months to get out of the General Council? An interesting question perhaps? This question is asked in an article in the Journal of Theology, the theological journal of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. In that article, the question isn't really stated outright, but it is implied; and it is implied in an accusing way. The article I am referring to is entitled "Fellowship Now and Then." It appears in the first issue of the Journal of Theology, and was written by Prof. E. Reim. In his article, Prof. Reim attacks a statement from an article which appeared under the same name, "Fellowship Now and Then," in the February 26, 1961, issue of the Northwestern Lutheran. The statement under attack is, "The Wisconsin Synod had first joined the General Council, but then left it when further testimony appeared to be of no avail."¹ Reim raises a question regarding the wording "when further testimony appeared to be of no avail." He then goes on to imply his accusation against the WELS. He gives a brief history of the Wisconsin Synod in the General Council. He finishes with a comment about present fellowship practices, referring

¹"Fellowship Now and Then," Northwestern Lutheran, Vol 48, Number 5 (February 26, 1961), 75.

obviously to the strife in the Wisconsin Synod at the time over fellowship with Missouri Synod. By so doing, he accuses the Wisconsin Synod of inconsistent fellowship practices. Prof. Reim's closing statement reads, "It goes as follows: Drafting of 'Fundamental Principles,' December 1866; Organization Meeting, with Wisconsin as a constituent member, November 1867; Wisconsin withdraws after protest against altar and pulpit-fellowship with non-Lutherans, June 1868. Certainly not a model for the tempo of today!"²

How might we answer this question which is proposed by Prof. Reim. One thing we might do first of all is to set the record straight in regards to a mistake made by Reim. Reim is right in stating that the first meeting of the General Council was held in 1866 and that a second organizational meeting was held in November of 1867. But where he made his mistake was in saying that the Wisconsin Synod was out of the General Council by June of 1868. Actually it wasn't until a year later that the Wisconsin Synod withdrew from the General Council. At the Synod convention in June, 1868, President Bading reported to the convention of the progress of the General Council including problems with fellowship principles, lodges, and millennialism. Koehler tells us what the response of the Synod was,

But by a rising vote the assembly decided 'that it condemns, together with the whole orthodox Lutheran church, every form of altar and pulpit fellowship with unorthodox and heterodox believers as contrary to the doctrine and practice of the Lutheran church.' The four men voted against the resolution and, with the exception of Lukas (who later changed his vote), asked for release from Synod.

Synod instructed its delegates to the next meeting of the council 'to plead this resolution, in the hope

²E. Reim, "Fellowship Now and Then," Journal of Theology, Vol 1, Number 1 (February, 1961), 48.

that the Council may soon see its way clear to take a certain and determined stand.³ They were also to ask that the publication of the hymnal be rushed, otherwise Synod would finally have to proceed with its own.³

The next convention of the General Council was held in November of 1868. The minutes of that convention state that a minority report was not given, but instead a declaration was made,

It was proposed next to consider the Minority Report, but its signers, declaring that many points of difference had been removed by the above action, received permission to withdraw it, and at a subsequent session made this

Declaration

Whereas, In the expressions of the General Council on the 'Four Points' many truths are confessed which are contained in the Minority Report, presented by the undersigned, we are ready to withdraw said Report, but can do it only by the declaration that in the decisions of the General Council on these points we do not find everywhere the full, unmistakable truth expressed which we confessed and defended; wherefore we feel ourselves conscientiously constrained, in order to make our position of Faith and Confession clear, to record the following:

In regard to the I point, we reject each and every form of Chiliasm as contrary to the Scriptures and the Confessions.

In regard to the II point, we declare that we consider secret societies, such as Free Masons, Odd Fellows, etc., as anti-Christian and soul-endangering associations, and earnestly warn against them.

In regard to the III and IV points, respecting Mixed Communion and Interchange of Pulpits, we designate such fellowship with those not Lutheran as a unionistic practice, dangerous for our Lutheran Church, and which we most decidedly reject.⁴

The withdrawal of the Wisconsin Synod from the General Council was then passed by the August 1869 convention of the Synod. The report of this appears in the minutes of the 1869 convention of the General Council. So the seven months which Prof. Reim speaks of, from November 1867 to June 1868, is actually a year and nine months. Perhaps not a significant change, but a change.

³J. F. Koehler, The History of the Wisconsin Synod (St. Cloud, Minn.: Sentinel Publishing Company, 1970), p. 117.

⁴Minutes of the General Council 1866-1879: Second Convention (Pittsburgh: Bakewell and Marthens, 1869), p. 25.

The question still remains however, how come there is such a difference in time in the Wisconsin Synod's dealing with the General Council and the Missouri Synod? To help us understand, we might ask a similar question, how come John walked to the post office on Monday and drove to the post office on Thursday? There might be any number of different reasons why John went to the post office in two different ways, such as: the weather, how much spare time John had, or how tired John was. In order for us to understand why John did what he did, we have to look at all of the factors in the situation. So in order for us to understand why the Wisconsin Synod acted differently in the 1860's than it did in the 1950's, we must look at the factors involved.

One factor has to do with the timing of the conventions themselves. In the 1950's, the Wisconsin Synod was meeting every two years and Missouri every three. The WELS first lodged a protest against the Missouri Synod in 1953, but it would be another three years, 1956, before Missouri could react to it. The Wisconsin Synod held a special convention in 1956 especially to react to the Missouri Synod convention. But after that it went back to two year conventions. In the 1860's both the General Council and the Wisconsin Synod were meeting every year. They were able to react to each other more quickly, and this certainly would have something to do with the time difference.

Another factor would certainly be the relationship which the Wisconsin Synod had with the LC-MS and the General Council. The Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin had been working together ever since the founding of the Synodical Conference back in 1872. That means that they had been together for 89 years. That's a

long time. Two groups can become very close after 89 years. Some pretty strong friendships can be formed. Many families were spread across the two synods. There was a strong feeling of love between the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod. Such a strong feeling of love was just not present in the General Council. The General Council was not that old. It was only three years old when Wisconsin withdrew. In fact in addressing the 1868 convention of the Synod, Bading spoke of greeting his new brothers from the Minnesota and Iowa Synods.⁵ There just was not the same bond of Christian love.

A very strong bond of trust can also be developed after 89 years. The Missouri Synod had always been a conservative confessional church body. After working with such a church body for so long, you begin to trust that church body. That bond of trust grows with the years. In fact when the LC-MS began to have problems, there were many in the Wisconsin Synod who could not believe that it was happening. Many believed that Missouri would soon return from her error. They trusted Missouri. Again, the Wisconsin Synod was only in the General Council for three years, and a close bond of trust cannot develop that quickly. In fact there were good reasons for the Wisconsin Synod not to trust the General Council. The General Council was first formed as a result of "The Fraternal Address" of Dr. Charles Krauth of the Pennsylvania Ministerium. He issued a call for all synods which confessed the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to meet to organize

⁵"Eighteenth Convention," Proceedings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod 1849-1879 (Watertown: Black and Red, 1965), p. 9.

in a general body. So the General Council was called together on the basis of the UAC. Membership in the General Council was dependant upon ratification of "Fundamental Principles of Faith and Church Polity," which acknowledged all the confessions of the Lutheran church. So this organization looked good on the outside. But there were, even from the beginning, problems regarding practices. Questions regarding these problems were raised by the Joint Ohio Synod at the Fort Wayne convention of 1867 in the form of "Four Points." They were: concerning Chiliasm, concerning altar fellowship, concerning pulpit fellowship, and concerning secret societies. The General Council came out officially against these practices, but they were allowing some men in the body to do these things. That is what caused the problems. That is why so many synods withdrew. That is why a bond of trust was just not there from the beginning.

Another factor to consider would be joint projects. The WELS and the LC-MS had been involved in joint projects in missions, schools, a home for the aged, a home for the retarded to name a few. To break fellowship with Missouri would mean an end to those joint efforts. Some might say this reasoning is mercenary. But to show a concern for these joint projects can also show a concern for the greatest good for the kingdom of God. To put an end to these joint projects was a concern and could have been very harmful for the Wisconsin Synod. The General Council was also working on projects, and the Wisconsin Synod was especially looking at one of these--a German hymnal. This was a concern for the Wisconsin Synod, but the loss of a hymnal was not quite as serious a concern

The factors we have mentioned are considerations in answering the question of why the WFLS took so much longer to break fellowship with the LS-MS than it did with the General Council. These considerations are not brought forward to defend Missouri Synod error, but Wisconsin Synod action. They are not mentioned as excuses for not doing what had to be done, but as reasons why the Wisconsin Synod acted as it did with the utmost of love and patience. Every case of breaking fellowship is different. Every case has different situations and circumstances, and has to be judged on the basis of these circumstances. Different people might judge different cases differently. But for one to judge how another judges a case is outside of our responsibility as Christians.

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