

THE
FUTURE OF CONFSSIONALISM
IN THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH-MISSOURI SYNOD

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When one hears Lutheran confessionalism in the United States mentioned, one is tempted to throw up his hands and say, "What Lutheran confessionalism?" This is not a pessimistic reaction--it is, unfortunately, one that seems to come spontaneously to a truly conservative and confessionally minded Lutheran. Perhaps nowhere has the tragic deterioration of sound Lutheran confessionalism been more obvious than in the synod we in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod enjoyed fellowship with for decades in the Synodical Conference--the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. To be sure much has been written concerning the problems the LCMS has had in the past and is still having today. Nevertheless, this writer has chosen to write again on the subject, specifically on the future of confessionalism in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

The scope of this paper, since it is admittedly predictive in nature, will be limited to developments in the LCMS since 1961. This is certainly not to imply that what happened and what was going on in that body prior to 1961 is unimportant. Rather the developments leading up to our break with Missouri are well-documented, of greatest importance in understanding that break, and were clearly preparatory to the break up in 1961 of the Synodical Conference as it had existed for years. In gathering information for this paper, care was taken to try to stay within the official record as much as possible. For this reason this writer has leaned heavily on the proceedings from the conventions of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, its official organ The Lutheran Witness, the reports of our own Commission on Inter-Church Relations, and direct quotes from the individuals who were of

importance in the course the Missouri Synod has been taking since 1961. In an effort to bring in the most recent information which sheds light on where Missouri is headed confessionally, the most recent issues of Christian News were used.

The developments in the LCMS since 1961 which have affected its confessionality are many. A paper that would exhaust all of these would be of necessity beyond the scope of a research paper, and would rather be more suitable to the format of a book. In light of this, the future of confessionality in the Missouri Synod will be projected on the basis of the two major issues of the past two decades of that church body's history---its fellowship principles and practice, and a closely related issue, the struggle over the authority of Scripture. The purpose of this paper will be to support the thesis that in view of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's fellowship principles and practice over the past twenty years, and the struggle which has gone on over the authority of Scripture, the future of confessionality in that body seems to be sadly unpromising.

Before examining the evidence used to support this thesis, time and space would be well used in taking a look at these two major issues in the light of Scripture. In so doing, it will become clear that God's Word is quite explicit on principles of church fellowship, unionism, and the authority of Scripture, and that these topics cannot be considered open questions, or simply matters of interpretation. In addition the Lutheran confessions will be cited to indicate that the Lutheran Church has historically testified to what the Word of God says on these issues. This treatment will endeavor to be concise and clear background against which the rest of the paper is to stand.

A doctrinal consideration that is most certainly germane to the

topic at hand is the doctrine of the church. Much of the false theology of church fellowship and unionistic practice is the direct result of confusion on this point. Let us then look to Scripture and the Lutheran confessions to see just what the doctrine of the church is. Scripture is quite explicit in pointing out that the church is, properly speaking, the communion of saints or the entire number of those whom the Holy Spirit has brought to faith in Christ. By bringing people to faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit brings them into an intimate bond with their Savior, a bond that also exists with all other believers. This is precisely what Paul speaks of when he says:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Ep 2:19-22).

Here Paul uses some graphic illustrations to picture this bond and its intimate nature. But he implies something here that is stated quite explicitly elsewhere. Paul is careful to point out that this work of building is not a work of man, but rather of God. He says:

because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God (Rm 8:14).

This statement certainly does not militate against all the places in Scripture where we are instructed to share the message of the gospel with all men and in so doing bring souls into a bond of faith with Christ their Savior. Rather Paul makes it quite clear that while we are indeed the ones given the task of disseminating the Good News to the world, it is still the Holy Ghost working through the gospel who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and preserves it in the one true faith in Christ Jesus. This

power of the Word is spoken of many, many times in Scripture. One picture Scripture uses to refer to this is found in I Peter:

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For,

"All men are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of the Lord stands forever."

And this is the word that was preached to you (1:23-25).

It is quite evident then, that membership into the church in its proper sense is determined only by faith in Christ---faith worked by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. Scripture is abundantly clear on this:

You are all the sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus (Ga 3:26).

In light of this, it becomes very clear that the church is naturally invisible to all except God, who alone searches the heart. It cannot be equated with any outward organization, and to do so flies in the face of what Scripture says about the church. Now this could lead some to conclude that the church is merely some theoretical gathering. Such is not the case. The church as the communion of saints definitely exists. Ephesians 1:19-22 which was cited previously makes this obvious, for there Paul speaks not of some theoretical supposition, but rather he speaks to real people about a very real thing.

Our Lutheran confessions state these truths quite briefly and concisely in the Augsburg Confession. In Article VIII we read:

...the Church properly is the congregation of saints and true believers.¹

And again in Article VII:

Also they (we) teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered.²

To those who might try to equate the communion of saints with an external organization, as Rome is want to do for example, our confessions reaffirm

the above statements thusly:

The Christian Church consists not alone in fellowship of outward signs, but it consists especially in inward communion of eternal blessings in the heart, as of the Holy Ghost, of faith, of the fear and love of God...And this Church alone is called the body of Christ, which Christ renews, and sanctifies, and governs by His Spirit...Wherefore those in whom Christ does not act are not the members of Christ.³

So then, since the Christian church in the proper sense is invisible, and cannot be equated with any outward organization or denomination, how can the believer know where it exists? The quote from the Apology above speaks of the marks of the church, namely the Word rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered. These are the means which, as we have seen, the Holy Spirit uses to bring sinners into the kingdom of God. We know from the clear Word of God also that these means are effective, i.e. they actually do what God says they do. Hence wherever we find the marks of the church we most certainly can expect to find members of the church. The Apology says:

...the kingdom of Christ exists only with the Word and sacraments.⁴

And wherever this church exists, so also its members are given the authority of the keys:

And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (Jn 20:22-23)

Luther also says this when he writes:

It is necessary to acknowledge that the keys belong not to the person of one particular man, but to the church, as many clear and firm arguments testify. For Christ, speaking concerning the keys, Mt 18:19, adds, 'If two or three of you shall agree on earth' etc. Therefore he grants the keys principally and immediately to the church, just as also for this reason the church has principally the right of calling (those who exercise the office of the keys)...⁵

If the Christian wants to know where the church is then, he need only look to where the gospel is taught correctly and where the sac-

ments are administered as Christ intended them. And while we as believers may not know for certain who else is a member of that church with us since faith is invisible to us, we can recognize a fellow Christian by his confession. Every believer, by nature is a confessor. This principle is stated by Christ himself when in rebuking the Pharisees He said:

...out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. (Mt 12:34)

We consider those to be believers who gather around the means of grace and confess their faith in Christ. And so we see that the invisible church, the church proper, becomes discernable by its use of the means of grace.

A great deal could be said about the organization of churches, of those gathered around the means of grace, at this point. Let a few observations suffice. Christians wherever they exist, to whom have been given the ministry of the keys and the responsibility of working in the Lord's kingdom will naturally band together. This is done not only for mutual edification, but also that they may work more efficiently. While Scripture clearly speaks of local congregations (Acts 8:1, Rm 16:16, I Cor 1:2, etc.), individuals given authority by such congregations (Acts 6:3-6, 15:2,27, II Cor 8:18-19), and larger groups or gatherings in the name of Jesus (Mt 18:19-20, Acts 20:28, I Tm 3:5), care must be taken not to draw invalid conclusions. We certainly know from Scripture that such gatherings of Christians around the means of grace are both God's will and pleasing to Him. Yet nowhere does God prescribe or divinely institute any particular form that the gathering of Christians is to take. Nowhere does God say that one form of organization is to be considered more authoritative than any other. Our confessions are clear on this point, that in Scripture no special institution is mentioned as of itself representing the church.

In the Smalcald Articles Luther writes:

Gal. 2, 7f. St Paul manifestly affirms that he was neither ordained nor confirmed (and endorsed) by Peter, nor does he acknowledge Peter to be one from whom confirmation should be sought. And he expressly contends concerning this point that his call does not depend on the authority of Peter. But he ought to have acknowledged Peter as a superior if Peter was superior by divine right (if Peter, indeed, had received such supremacy from Christ). Paul accordingly says that he had at once preached the Gospel (freely for a long time) without consulting Peter. Also: Of those who seemed to be somewhat (whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me; God accepteth no man's person). And: They who seemed to be somewhat in conference added nothing to me. Since Paul, then, clearly testifies that he did not even wish to seek for the confirmation of Peter (for permission to preach) even when he had come to him, he teaches that the authority of the ministry depends upon the Word of God, and that Peter was not superior to the other apostles, and that it was not from this one individual Peter that ordination or confirmation was to be sought (that the office of the ministry proceeds from the general call of the apostles, and that it is not necessary for all to have the call or confirmation of this one person, Peter, alone).

Hence it is clear from both Scripture and our Lutheran confessions that the church is completely free to act according to the circumstances in how it should organize itself.

But while it is true that every Christian is by nature a confessor of his faith, it is also true that all who confess the Christian faith are not true Christians. All those who gather around the means of grace are not necessarily members of the communion of saints, the church in its proper sense. When we speak of the visible church, we must first make it quite clear that there are not two churches, nor is there merely a visible side of the true church. Rather we call visible congregations of those gathered around the means of grace (which may well include hypocrites) church synechdochically, i.e. the term church is applied to all in view of those members of the invisible church who exist there. In other words, visible churches are manifestations of the true church which becomes known through confession. To speak of them as the

visible side of the church cannot but lead us to the false conclusion that hypocrites belong to the body of Christ, when Scripture clearly tells us that since they do not have faith they cannot be members of that body. To sum this up then, we might well use Koehler's terse statement in which he differentiates between these two terms and indicates the relationship:

The invisible church is the total number of those who have true faith in their hearts; the visible church is the total number of those who profess the faith. The invisible church is hidden in the visible church.⁷

Regarding the church in its improper sense, i.e. the visible church, we must acknowledge that many denominations exist. And since there is clearly a wide diversity of teachings, we must conclude that differences in doctrine abound. A basic observation we make at this point is based on the Word of God---either a doctrine is true or it is false. One naturally excludes the other. Scripture tells us that truth is intolerant of a lie when it says:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? (II Cor 6:14)

And since a believer will be under obligation to his own spiritual safety to avoid false doctrine which destroys faith, some way must be found to distinguish denominations or visible churches according to which of two categories they belong. On the one hand, our dogmatists speak of ecclesiae verae or ecclesiae orthodoxae. These are churches which according to their public confessions adhere to the unadulterated doctrine of God's Word and administer the sacraments according to their divine institution. Such a confession must of course, include practice which conforms to God's Word and its confession or it is no confession at all. On the other hand,

our dogmaticians also speak of ecclesiae falsae or ecclesiae heterodoxae. These are churches who tolerate, foster, and defend teachings that are not in line with Scripture, whose practice is not Bible-based, and who deviate from divine institution in the sacraments. In fact at times a whole visible church may fall under this heading. Nevertheless, even in such an erring body real Christians are found because the pure gospel is still at times heard there. Such Christians exist and survive in these false churches not because of that churches heterodox teaching, but in spite of it. Of course, it goes without saying that these Christians in such church bodies are there because they do not realize the error. To err knowingly and intentionally is incompatible with faith. Yet it must be remembered that in making a decision on the basis of the public confession of a body, the Christians will heed all of Scriptures stern warnings to avoid false teachers and their faith destroying dogma.

This then brings us to the matter of church fellowship and unionism. Before examining the principles involved, a definition of each term is in order. In the presentation of this subject by the Wisconsin Synod Commission on Doctrinal Matters we find this definition:

Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another. ⁸

This is based on many passages in Scripture which tell us that before God every activity of our faith is at the same time fellowship activity in the communion of saints (I Cor 12, Ep 4:1-16, Rm 12:1-18, II Tm 2:19). This one concept of church fellowship is used to cover many different expressions of faith that speak of many different activities, such as altar fellowship, pulpit fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian education, and in

errors in Christianity today, and sadly enough in Lutheranism, is completely in conflict with God-pleasing principles and practice of church fellowship. As far as our public ministry goes, perhaps no other sin is quite so tempting as this one. The world around us despises and ridicules the division in the church, and so it is not surprising that there is constant pressure on us from those around us to minimize any doctrinal differences and join together.

But the basis for recognizing and practicing church fellowship is not one which we are at liberty to concoct arbitrarily. Scripture clearly leads us to the conviction that agreement in Christian doctrine is a necessary presupposition for recognizing and practicing church fellowship. We are told that the church rests on the foundation of Scripture in Ephesians 2:19-20. This close bond between the church and God's Word is also spoken of by Christ Himself when He says:

If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. (Jn 8:31-32)

Thus it is not surprising that Paul admonishes Christians to avoid any teaching in conflict with the sound Word of God:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel---which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

In light of this our dogmaticians speak of fides qua and fides quae. The former term speaks of the faith with which we believe, the personal, subjective faith in the heart. To try to make this subjective faith alone the basis for church fellowship seeks to do so with little or no regard for the object of that faith. This is both Scripturally,

explicitly that the Scriptural principle of unity in all doctrine is the sole basis for church fellowship. In the Epitome we read;

We believe, teach, and confess also that no church should condemn another because one has less or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other, if otherwise there is agreement among them in the doctrine and all its articles, as also in the right use of the holy sacraments.¹²

At this point, a matter which naturally comes under consideration is how these articles of faith are established. Briefly stated, making doctrinal unity the basis for church fellowship presupposes that Scripture is the authoritative source and norm for all Christian doctrine. So closely are the doctrines of the authority of Scripture and church fellowship bound up with each other, that error in either one will ultimately influence the other. The history of many Christian denominations bears witness to the fact that error over the authority of Scripture leads to error in church fellowship by leaving the basis open to private interpretation and discrepancy, rather than insisting on full accord with the Word of God as it is clearly written. On the other hand, when one's interest is more caught up with joining hands with as many other denominations as possible despite obvious doctrinal differences, the authority of Scripture can easily come to be viewed as a barrier to unity and unionistic practice follows. Perhaps this is one reason why the ecumenical movement has flourished wherever the doctrine of the authority of Scripture has been compromised or rejected.

Scripture is quite clear in claiming to be the source of all Christian doctrine, as well as the norm according to which all doctrine must be judged. Christ spoke of His Word as the source of life-giving doctrine to His disciples in John 8:31-32 which was cited on page 11. Concerning Scripture's authority as the norm of all doctrine, Peter

says:

If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

Lest any doubt that our own Lutheran confessions have historically testified to the authority of Scripture, we have this statement at the very beginning of the Epitome:

We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with (all) teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Ps. 119, 105: Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. And St. Paul: Though an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed, Gal. 1,8.¹³

Thus we must acknowledge God's Word as the only and highest authority for determining doctrine (I Tm 6:3-4). No fears of error in this Word are warranted, for we know that Scripture cannot err (Jn 10:35, 17:17) no matter what subject it speaks on. Nor is that Word open to private interpretation, for there is but one plain, proper, and divinely intended sense and meaning. This is precisely why we hold to the axiom that we are to let Scripture interpret Scripture.

The authority of Scripture is closely related to the doctrine of inspiration. Speaking of Scripture's inerrancy also certainly brings into consideration its divine inspiration. There are many passage in the Bible which claim for the Word of God divine inspiration. One of the clearest comes from the pen of St. Paul:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, (II Tm 3:16)

Much more could be said on this subject, but a great deal of space need not be given to a doctrine that we accept as one of the most basic truths of the Christian religion. Let us simply observe that according to God's own Word, Scripture came not by human decision, but by divine

(Ph 3:12, Ep 4:14, 3:16-18, I Th 5:14, He 5:12, I Pe 2:2). Such imperfections must be expected realistically speaking, but one must not become indifferent to them. The Christian church body, like the Christian individual, will always strive for more perfect understanding and practice of Scriptural truths and principles.

In the matter of sustaining and terminating church fellowship, two Scriptural principles apply: the debt of love which Christ would have us pay to the weak brother, and His clear command to avoid those who persist in clinging to and teaching false doctrine. Regarding this first principle, Scripture has many examples to show us that weakness in a brother in itself is not reason for terminating fellowship. This weakness can be in the area of trust in God's promises (Mt 6:25-34), or in the area of realizing and fully enjoying our Christian Liberty (Rm 14, I Cor 8:9). Paul sets the example for us in many places that we ought to strive to build up the weak brother with the gospel and lead him to overcome his weakness, rather than being quick to separate ourselves from him. To do any less would be to show a lack of love and concern for the spiritual health of one of the redeemed of Christ.

On the other hand, termination of fellowship becomes the only alternative when the Christian meets with persistent adherence to false doctrine and practice. If a brother or church body rejects, ignores, and despises all brotherly admonition and instruction from the Word of God and clings to the error, we must label this as sin and terminate church fellowship. In many cases with individuals, the error may not directly attack the foundation of the saving faith. In such cases we are not warranted in excommunicating the errorist, but we ought solemnly warn against the error. If such an individual should persist in teaching his false doctrine, then separation is the only action

we can take. It hardly needs saying that nowhere in Scripture are we ever given the directive to excommunicate whole church bodies.

Nevertheless, in Romans 16:17-18 we are given the instruction to withdraw and exclude ourselves from any contact and activity with errorists that would be construed as an acknowledgement of church fellowship:

I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.

We are given no time table here concerning withdrawing from fellowship with those we are already in fellowship with when the error becomes apparent. This will have to be left to the Christian conscience. Great care will be taken not to linger in such fellowship for an inordinate length of time. On the other hand, we are clearly forbidden by this passage from Romans to enter into church fellowship with those who hold some error in doctrine.

The doctrinally conservative and confessional Christian will do well to keep these Scriptural teachings concerning church fellowship, unionism, and the authority of Scripture in mind. The doctrinally conservative and confessional pastor will do well to remember that we are bound by God's Word, the only source and norm of Christian doctrine, and that the Lutheran confessions are an accurate explanation of what that Word teaches. With this in mind, a quatenus subscription to our confessions is invalid, and a quia subscription alone is acceptable to bear the name Lutheran in the strictest sense of the term!

I do not mean to imply by this that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has ever officially adopted or sanctioned a quatenus subscription to the Lutheran confessions. On the contrary, from the time Article II of

Missouri's constitution was framed up to the present day, the LCMS has officially stood for nothing less than a quia subscription to the confessions. In this respect, that church body cannot be faulted. Nor has this in any way whatsoever contributed to the problems that have plagued that body. References in the proceedings of the regular conventions of the Missouri Synod since 1961 to the official position on the confessions abound. The official organ of the Missouri Synod also has numerous like statements. One is heartened at hearing and reading fine confessional statements from the Missouri Synod. The problem of confessional subscription in the LCMS is rather one of practice. There have been and are those in the Missouri Synod who would make the Lutheran confessions irrelevant to church fellowship, and view them as only a divisive factor. As early as 1961 liberal Missourian Martin Marty was publicly urging like-minded liberals not only in the LCMS, but also in other denominations to take steps:

for constructive subversion, encirclement, and infiltration, until antitecumical forces bow to the evangelical weight of reunion.¹⁴

Notice that confessional principles are ignored. A statement made by John Tietjen in 1969 in the Concordia Theological Monthly, which is edited by the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, is even more blatantly in favor of this view of ~~the~~ confessions:

The purpose of creeds is not to enforce theological conformity but to serve church unity. Together we accept the creeds as statements of the truth of the gospel. Ours is a confessional unity. Within that unity there is room---lots of it---for theological variety.¹⁵

Here the purpose of a confession is switched from being a clear profession of faith that is to be held to and conformed to, to one that is willing to recognize and tolerate "theological variety." As we have seen, either one's theology is right or wrong on a certain point, room for divergant

views in theology is out of keeping with Scripture being the source and norm of all Christian doctrine. A creed is a creed only if it takes seriously what it confesses to be true. Basically the same idea Tietjen expressed is made with direct reference to our Lutheran confessions by the Seminex confession of 1973:

...our Confessions, however, are not intended to be barriers between denominations, but bold affirmations of Christ, His Gospel and the unity of His Church.¹⁶

This indicates what the real problem of confessional subscription is in the Missouri Synod. While often repeating its official stand on the Lutheran confessions, it simultaneously indicates that such an official position is not of greatest importance by allowing those to remain in its ministerium who would frown on even a quatenus subscription. There is a very serious ethical dilemma facing those in the LCMS today, for there are many who claim membership not only in the synod, but also hold teaching and preaching positions whose confessional and theological stance is obviously at variance with the official stand of their church body. These do not feel themselves bound either by their ordination vow nor by their conscience to leave the Missouri Synod, but rather for the sake of a false kind of ecumenism they are willing to soft pedal or discard firm Scriptural principles and practice of true confessionalism. Kurt Marquart of the LCMS certainly realizes the problem:

The moment we let go of modest faith and depend on arrogant sight, we begin to hanker after numbers and outward grandeur. Then the borders between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, Gospel and pseudo-gospel, confession and denial, become confused, and we are ready victims for the spectacular counterfeit church of the great Ecumenical Compromise. Under the hypnotic spell of glamorous Ecumenical mirages and siren songs, mistaken for the one, holy church of Christ, formerly solemn confessions appear as mere "denominational tags," and a confessional fellowship guided strictly by the pure marks of Christ's church seems like a petty, "man-made" substitute for and obstacle to the glorious New Testament reality! The basic issue is very simply this: Is outward, organizational bigness, or confessional faithfulness and truthfulness the real key to the mystery of the New Testament

Church? The Lutheran Confessions (Augsburg Confession and Apology VII and VIII) give one answer; the modern Ecumenical Movement gives a radically different one.¹⁷

Dr. Siegbert Becker of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary spoke to this very point when he said in answer to the question, "What is your view of Missouri's subscription to the Confessions?"---

The orthodox character of a church is determined not only by what is subscribed to on paper but by what is actually taught in its pulpits, schools, and literature. Where doctrinal discipline is not carried out subscription to the confessions will finally become pure hypocrisy. "WE condemn" becomes a paper tiger.¹⁸

Evidence of a kind of sub-confessional thinking in Missouri is by no means limited to mere statements. The very attitude of the Missouri Synod concerning church fellowship principles and practice over the past twenty years only serves to underscore the deterioration of confessionalism in that body. In and even prior to 1961, the LCMS had certain entrenched unionistic practices. To briefly mention some of these we cite meetings at which prayer fellowship was exercised with the National Lutheran Council, in conferences of Lutheran professors of theology, and retreats for Lutheran chaplains. There was cooperation with the Lutheran World Federation in radio preaching, the support of the Lutheran Welfare Council, as well as many examples of unionistic practice by individuals.

What has shaped the fellowship practice of Missouri since 1961 has been the very document over which we in the WELS finally had to break fellowship with the LCMS. In its Theology of Fellowship--Part Two, there were statements made which did not reflect sound Scriptural teaching concerning fellowship, and could only have resulted in continued, growing, and accelerated unionistic practices. Quite simply, in that document there was a distinction made between kinds of fellowship. Church fellowship was not viewed as a unit concept which covered every joint expression, and

manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith. The document denied that the same principles govern all joint expressions, manifestations, and demonstrations of a common faith. It claimed that the principles which apply in determining who can practice pulpit and altar fellowship do not apply also in deciding who may pray together and jointly engage in various kinds of spiritual work. A clear demonstration of this view can be found in an article in The Lutheran Witness on the Theology of Fellowship--Part II. There it was stated:

Confessional-organizational forms of fellowship are means rather than an end in themselves. Christian fellowship is not static, but dynamic, outreaching, self-extending, in principle as universal as the Lordship of Christ. Therefore the matter of joint prayer between Christians not in the same confessional-organizational fellowship cannot be determined by a flat universal rule.

The criterion of walking uprightly according to the truth of the Gospel must be applied in each case; each case must be evaluated as it arises. This evaluation must consider the situation in which such prayer is offered, the character of the prayer, its purpose, and its probable effect on those who unite in prayer.

The situation in which joint prayer is to be offered must be carefully evaluated. Two questions should be asked in regard to each situation; (1) Is this a situation in which Christian prayer is appropriate? (2) Are the people involved such as can offer prayer in the Christian sense, that is, can they pray in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ? If the answer to both questions is "yes," then there is no objection to joint prayer on this score.

The character of the prayer offered is of greatest importance. Every genuinely Christian prayer offered in consciousness of its living context incorporates a confession and a witness to Christ; it needs therefore be no more unionistic in itself than any other form of witness.

The purpose of joint prayer also needs to be considered. A prayer which seeks to conceal or to smooth over real differences does not edify the body of Christ and is indefensible. A prayer which flows from the desire to build up the body of Christ and is an expression of that desire is a part of the hazard of love for which we need not tremble before the judgement seat of God.

The probable effect of such joint prayer must also be considered. Every conscientious Christian must be aware of the fact that his whole life...is a witness for or against his Lord. He will therefore deal carefully and in holy awe with the precious privilege of prayer and will not misuse, cheapen, or degrade prayer by using it for ends which are not the Lord's.¹⁹

Even when the WELS gave the Missouri Synod its strongest witness against

this Scripturally untenable position by withdrawing the hand of fellowship, the LCMS did not take action to rework the document. In spite of this, in December of 1961 Dr. J.W. Behnken of the Missouri Synod invited our Commission on Inter-Church Relations to meet with Missouri's Committee on Doctrinal Concerns in January of 1962 at St. Louis. The invitation was turned down with this reply:

Our Commission is presently of the opinion that any attempt at a joint meeting should be postponed until your Synod has met in convention next June and expressed itself on the issues between our two bodies.²⁰

When the LCMS met in convention at Cleveland in June of 1962 a great deal was done---but not to safeguard Missouri's confessionalism. On the contrary, many steps were taken which indicated that the deterioration of confessionalism in the LCMS was going to continue. It became clear that those delegates who took a brave, bold stand against liberalism in doctrine and practice in the LCMS were a minority, and while they were vocal their voices had no significant effect. First of all, the text of the 1961 resolution in which we suspended fellowship with the Missouri Synod, set forth the reasons for doing so, stated the spirit in which that action was taken, and expressed a desire for the LCMS to return to herself, was not made available to the delegates. It seems there was sentiment among many that the WELS was not wholly serious, and that the break was simply some kind of protest. The executive secretary at Cleveland played on this, and so the document was intentionally withheld.

It would not be fair to give the impression that the Cleveland convention took no action concerning the Theology of Fellowship--Part II. The newly formed Commission of Theology and Church Relations was urged to revise or replace the document, a resolution which was passed in view of memorials before the convention to repudiate or reject the document under

discussion. It must also be noted, however, that no such revision or replacement has been brought forth to this date that does anything to correct the errors in the first document. In fact in 1967 at the New York convention the Theology of Fellowship was officially adopted for reference and guidance!

Also in Cleveland Dr. Behnken in consultation with the CTCR appointed seven representatives to meet with a similar number of representatives of other Lutheran church bodies in the U.S. willing to enter into conversations regarding a Lutheran inter-church association. Other similar actions were noted which likewise indicated a unionistic bent. The India Evangelical Lutheran Church which was affiliated with the LCMS applied for membership in the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, and was only mildly warned to use caution. The FELCI itself was unionistic, and a December 1961 news release of the National Lutheran Council mentioned a joint communion service attended by members of FELCI and the World Council of Churches. It was also admitted in convention that in their first meetings with the Presbyterians, members of ~~the~~ Missouri's Committee on Doctrinal Unity had practiced joint prayer.

A rather enlightening development occurred at this convention which indicated exactly where Missouri was heading confessionally. The Lutheran World Federation's Commission on Theology asked the LCMS Commission of Theology and Church Relations:

Is it possible in principle for The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to enter into affiliation with other Lutheran Churches not now in fellowship with it with the intent of leading them toward, and encouraging them in, doctrines and practices that The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod approves, instead of insisting on full acceptance of all such doctrinal positions and practices is advance?²¹

The Commission on Theology and Church Relations replied:

In our opinion there need not be full agreement in doctrine and practice at the outset if the Federation faces the fact of this lack of agreement, expressly makes the attainment of full unity in doctrine and practice the goal of the Federation, and in its constitution makes provision for working toward that goal.²²

By the time the LCMS met in convention at Detroit in June of 1965, another problem which was to shape the future of the Missouri Synod confessionally became evident. The problems Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and other institutions were having were becoming increasingly obvious. The topic of the struggle at Concordia, St. Louis which was to continue for almost ten years is one that warrants treatment in a separate paper, for justice could not be done here. Rather than treat it shallowly, this writer would refer the reader to Exodus From Concordia, a book written by the Board of Control of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. It is an accurate, thorough, and well-documented account of the whole affair. Treatment of the doctrinal aberrations concerning the authority of Scripture will rather be restricted to events which transpired at the conventions of the LCMS. One of the first indications that there was a lack of real unity and position on the authority of Scripture in the LCMS was the appearance of a document called A Study Document on Revelation, Inspiration, and Inerrancy. This uncertain position and lack of unity in teaching on the doctrine involved can perhaps best be illustrated by the number of memorials presented before the convention dealing specifically with this matter. They are listed below with the action that was taken on them:

2-09 To Reaffirm Unwavering Loyalty to the Scriptures as the Inspired and Inerrant Word of God, etc... (Adopted).

2-10 To Petition the 1965 Detroit Convention to Reaffirm the Historic Christian and Lutheran Doctrine of the Mosaic Authorship of the First Five Books of the Bible, etc... (No mention was made of this memorial in the proceedings of the convention, no action taken).

- 2-11 To Petition the Detroit Convention to Request... Resignation of all...Professors, Pastors, Teachers Who Continue To Maintain That the Prophet Isaiah Did Not Write The Entire Book of Isaiah, etc....(The action taken on this memorial was somewhat confusing. It was adopted, but it was not clearly stated that Isaiah did author that whole book. Also in the reply to the memorial there was no mention made whatsoever concerning the call for the resignation of those who continued to teach otherwise.)
- 2-12 To Petition the Detroit Convention to Reaffirm the Historicity of the Jonah Account, etc....(Adopted.)
- 2-13 To Petition the Detroit Convention to Reaffirm the Historic Christian Doctrine that the Old Testament Directly Predicts a Personal Messiah, etc....(Adopted).
- 2-14 To Relieve of Their Position...Professors...Who Reject Literal Interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2, etc....(This memorial was not answered directly, and I was unable to ascertain just what action was taken. Again the record of the proceedings on this point was confusing.)
- 2-15 To Petition the Detroit Convention To Have the Synod Affirm Its Conviction that Adam and Eve Were Historical Personages, etc....(This memorial was adopted, yet more study of the matter was urged.)
- 2-16 To Petition the Detroit Convention to Reaffirm that it Accepts the Doctrine that God Made Heaven and Earth in Six Days, etc....(The same action was taken on this memorial as was taken on 2-15, which is indicated directly above.)
- 2-209 To Have the Synod Acknowledge Openly that Antiscriptural Teaching Has Made Inroads Within the Synod, etc...(Adopted.)²³

The above references not only indicate that the questions raised concerning the authority of Scripture were extremely far reaching ones, but the nature of the action taken on them seems to indicate a great deal of reluctance on the part of the liberals to answer the charges, or a tragic inability of the conservatives to force the issue to be faced squarely. In any case it is clear that theological variety existed on this most crucial of doctrines. But besides this, on the question of fellowship, further study was requested before entering into membership in the Lutheran World Federation. Yet financial support was voted to be given to the LWF for inter-confessional research projects. It was also at this convention

that LCMS membership into the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. was voted in.

A development at the 1965 convention that sheds light on the future of confessionalism in the LCMS was the appearance of a document called Mission Affirmations. This document dealt with the role and function of the Church in missions, and was to be used by LCMS commissions, boards, and conventions as a supporting guideline for new policies. Unfortunately this document seemed to follow the same kind of thinking found in the Theology of Fellowship--Part II and in Missouri's subsequent fellowship practices. In Mission Affirmations little evidence was given of an adherence to God's Word in all its parts. The social gospel attitude was evident, and there was an ominously unclear tone in the document relative to the one basic task Christ gave the Church---to preach repentance and the remission of sins to the whole world. The general unionistic flavor of this paper was evident in its unclear and ambiguous language and terminology.

The 1967 convention of the LCMS at New York was merely a continuation along the road to confessional deterioration which the Missouri Synod was steadily traveling. Resolutions were adopted here which provided for study with an eye toward fellowship with the ALC and the LCA. Study was also urged concerning possible membership in the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches.

Perhaps it was in reaction to the Harms administration (1962-1969) which was growing increasingly more liberal in doctrine and practice, that many conservatives in the LCMS began to look for leadership that might turn things around. Their roving eye fell on Jacob A.O. Preus. When the LCMS met in convention at Denver in July of 1969, there were those who were looking to this convention as a virtual watershed. Was the

LCMS under Preus about to be entering an age of confessionalism, or would it continue its practice of concessionality for the sake of ecumenicity? As it has turned out, the years which have followed have shown it to be a little of both.

Some of the most significant action taken by the LCMS under its newly elected president dealt with church fellowship with the ALC. Pres. Preus made it clear that he personally was not in favor of declaring altar and pulpit fellowship with the ALC, but he was quick to add that he would abide by the convention's decisions. Evidently, the matter of fellowship with the ALC was not seriously in conflict with Pres. Preus' conscience, and when the fellowship was voted in 522 to 438 on a second ballot he concurred with the body. The establishing of fellowship with the ALC, as Dr. Preus pointed out in his 1971 address to the convention, was well received in some areas of the Synod, but was rejected in others.

The issues before the 1971 convention brought to the attention of the delegates by Pres. Preus were clearly related to its confessional stance. The results of the fact-finding committee sent to investigate what was going on at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, indicated that there was much being taught there that was neither Lutheran nor Scriptural. A request was made to look into various aspects of ICUSA to be sure that no fellowship principles were being violated. It is important to note that this request followed a statement in which Dr. Preus defended Missouri's membership in that body.

Another interesting development occurred here which throws some light on Missouri's confessional position on church fellowship. The subject of selective fellowship, i.e. fellowship practiced by the individual congregation apart from the synod, had always been discouraged. At the Milwaukee convention it was agreed to study the matter. Was the

door to selective fellowship opening? It would certainly appear so. This selective fellowship would seem to be the logical and ultimate conclusion of the fellowship principles Missouri had been guided by in the Theology of Fellowship--Part II and its old idea of what is church. It has been said that Missouri from its beginnings has always insisted that the local congregation alone exists by divine institution, and therefore can alone be called church. This supposition is not wholly accurate. This local congregation idea may have been spooking around in the Missouri Synod for some time, but it was most vocally promulgated by Dr. Theodore Graebner. In a 1949 essay at Bad Boll he said:

If single congregations by combining with others form larger unions--synods--territorial churches--or, through delegated authority, alliances like EKID or World Council, then they have that right from the same authority (I Cor. 3:21) of their members; but what they form are not churches. Their purpose is not the fulfillment of a divine commission, but the solution of a problem posed by time and world.²⁴

It was precisely this kind of thinking that led many congregations to request the right to exercise church fellowship with other congregations with whom they found themselves in agreement apart from the Synod. Fortunately no official espousal of this practice has come forth in the years since 1971, but problems relating to this issue are making themselves known. An example is the many individuals and congregations presently holding membership in both the LCMS and the AELC.

In 1973 the LCMS convention took great strides in recovering ground lost to liberals concerning the authority of Scripture. It would seem that for the first time in many years the conservatives were in a majority. Voting at New Orleans indicated that conservatives comprised roughly sixty percent of the voting delegates, the other forty percent being liberals. It was here at last, that action was taken concerning the extremely liberal leadership of Dr. John Tietjen at Concordia Seminary,

St. Louis. Floor Committee #3 unanimously offered a resolution to the convention which was passed, and which charged that Dr. Tietjen;

1. Allowed and fostered the teaching and dissemination of doctrine contrary to the Scripture and the Synod's historic confessional stance (Constitution, Article II, and the Charter of Concordia Seminary);
2. Became a principal party and failed to mediate and settle professorial disagreements;
3. Was administratively irresponsible;
4. Presumptuously and wrongfully assumed Board of Control duties and prerogatives;
5. On occasion intimidated Board of Control members;
6. Demeaned the integrity and position of certain faculty members;
7. Demeaned the office of the synodical President and defied the executive authority thereof;
8. Refused to cooperate with the synodical President particularly in doctrinal considerations.
9. Was insubordinate to the authority of the Board for Higher Education;
10. Failed to maintain careful watch over the spiritual welfare, personal life, and conduct of the student body;²⁵

Provision was made to remove him from office if he did not tender his resignation before the convention dissolved. When he did not comply with this request for resignation, the matter was handed over to the Board of Control. As a result, Tietjen was not removed from office until January 29, 1974. Student outrage over how the whole matter was handled, and as a result of Tietjen's suspension, culminated in an exodus by a majority of faculty and students from Concordia, and under Tietjen founded Seminex.

Observing the ground gained here concerning the authority of Scripture, our Synod observers expressed their hope and prayer that no delay be taken in regard to these matters with respect to discipline. Because of the time spent on other issues, no action was taken concerning fellowship with the ALC, LCUSA membership, and any revision of Mission Affirmations.

In 1975 at Anaheim, the Missouri Synod position on the authority of Scripture was re-affirmed. In addition resolutions were adopted which outlined procedures for dealing with those who opposed that position.

Several resolutions were passed which dealt specifically with Seminex. If Seminex refused to close its doors, it would be regarded as any other seminary outside the Missouri Synod. There was approved a procedure whereby Seminex professors might disassociate themselves from the doctrinal position rejected at New Orleans and thereby remove the cloud under which they had placed themselves when they withdrew from the jurisdiction of Concordia Seminary's Board of Control. Firm steps were prescribed for dealing with district presidents who would persist in the ordination and placement of uncertified Seminex graduates. There was also a request made to ELiM members to stop running an opposition seminary.

At this point, developments in the years since these resolutions were passed might well indicate whether the LCMS' confessionalism on this point has moved farther to the right, or whether it has not changed to any measureable degree. In 1977 by Synod resolution the historical-critical method of Biblical interpretation was rejected. In 1979 the LCMS voted to continue to refuse to accept Seminex graduates into the pastorates of the Synod except by way of the colloquy program. Since the 1975 convention resolutions were passed, evidence points to the fact that the discipline mentioned therein has not been taken seriously, nor has the refusal to allow graduates into the ministerium of the LCMS been upheld by certain district presidents. Seminex estimates that about 150 to 200 of its graduates are presently holding LCMS positions, and also that upwards of half of them were either certified or seeking certification. A LCUSA report which appeared in the March 10, 1980 issue of Christian News said that out of eighty Seminex graduates applying for certification, thirty-six of them said their theological position has not moved closer to the LCMS! Of forty-three graduates

of Seminex surveyed in connection with certification procedures, five were turned down, six were on "hold", and thirty-two were certified.

That there are many in the LCMS teaching and preaching ministry who are theologically aligned with Seminex is not conjecture---numbers are. In the March 31, 1980 issue of Christian News, a letter by Dr. John Tietjen was reproduced in which he indicates that there are many who contact him asking how they can become alumni of Seminex even though they did not graduate from that institution. It is certainly obvious that the LCMS' confessionalism concerning the authority of Scripture has not been backed up by serious action on the doctrinal discipline of those not only holding but promulgating false doctrine!

But what has happened since 1975 concerning the fellowship practice the Missouri Synod? In 1977 at Dallas fellowship with the ALC was again passed, but it was continued "in protest"---an action that was repeated in 1979 at St. Louis. The doctrinal differences between the two bodies which became obvious were to be discussed, and presumably are still being discussed. LCUSA membership was again voted to be continued. In a major step backward in confessionalism concerning church fellowship, there was provision made for training future LCMS pastors in Canada at Saskatoon, at a seminary jointly conducted by the ALC and the LCA and its affiliated bodies. This program was voted to be phased out at the 1979 convention. What went on at Dallas indicated widespread unclarity concerning the Scriptural concept of church fellowship. It was evident that fellowship practices were at variance among pastors, circuit counsellors, district presidents, and overseas missionaries. There had still been no clear Scriptural statement set forth and implemented in areas of unionistic practice in the LCMS.

In 1979 at St. Louis, the confusion and non-confessional practice

of church fellowship continued with no new statement on the subject. Fellowship in protest with the ALC was again voted to continue by a margin of 861 to 147. LCUSA membership was passed again---this time unanimously. It was precisely this lack of gain in the area of church fellowship that prompted our Commission on Doctrinal Matters to conclude:

It is our conviction that Missouri's recent return to orthodox teaching on the authority and inerrancy of Scripture will be a battle fought in vain unless that synod returns to fellowship principles that are thoroughly Scriptural.²⁶

What does the future hold for confessionalism in the LCMS?

Much could depend on the 1981 convention. If Dr. Preus is re-elected any move to the right confessionally with regard to fellowship could be a long way off. On February 21, 1980 he said:

The future for the LCMS will be one of unity and good spirit. The proposed merger between the LCA, ALC, and AELC will take place in the near future. I wonder just exactly what form that merger will take. Missouri Synod will continue to relate to whatever form that merger takes, though, through continued support and membership in LCUSA. I guess I kind of agree with my cousin David, we are able to solve some problems---and create new ones. It takes a while to make any merger work....²⁷

This is certainly not the kind of leadership that is bent towards a truly God-pleasing kind of confessionalism. Fortunately perhaps, J.A.O. Preus may not be the next LCMS choice for president. Recent indications are that Dr. W.A. Maier, professor at Concordia Seminary, Ft. Wayne, may be the next president of the LCMS. At least he is one who has no use for fellowship with the ALC of any kind in view of the doctrinal differences which exist between those two bodies.

What happens at the 1981 convention and following will certainly tell the story of where Missouri is headed confessionally. The developments of the past cited in this paper certainly indicate that the future of confessionalism in the LCMS is anything but bright. The basic issues involved in the deterioration of its confessionalism have yet

to be resolved. As this writer sees it, five things are going to have to happen before the LCMS again can lay claim to true confessionalism as a Lutheran church body. First, its confessional subscription is going to have to be backed up by discipline. It cannot continue to allow such wide doctrinal diversity in its midst and hope for a future of unity and good spirit. Second, if necessary, it is going to have to revise or at least clarify its system of church polity. This must be done not only to restore good order, but also to facilitate doctrinal discipline. Such discipline and practice of fellowship cannot be left solely in the hands of the local congregation. Their recent past history shows that this just doesn't work. Third, its fellowship principles are going to have to be reworked and brought in line with Scripture. Fourth, it is going to have to withdraw from all councils, federations, and fellowship with groups in doctrinal disunity with Missouri. The "unity-at-any-price-no-matter-how-long-it-takes" attitude cannot continue to be the basis for entering into or for justifying fellowship. Finally, the LCA, ALC, AELC merger must be seen as something the Missouri Synod cannot relate to as far as any kind of fellowship goes.

In conclusion, this writer would make it clear that the above are not intended as conditions that must be fulfilled before any good progress toward truly Lutheran confessionalism can be made in the LCMS. The above steps will be taken as the Holy Spirit leads the members of the LCMS to recognize and practice a truly Scriptural and God-pleasing kind of confessionalism. I do not presume to sit in judgement of the faith of any of those individuals I have named in this paper. My goal has been simply to make an educated guess at what the future holds for confessionalism in the LCMS on the basis of the events in that body since 1961. In the future of that body, its attitude toward church fellowship and unionism is going to be the single most important issue to shaping that

confessionalism. To this point, Prof. Arnauld Schueler of the Seminario Concórdia, Porto Alegre, Brazil, lays his finger on precisely the issue which faces the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in the years to come:

The Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions make the practice of fellowship dependent on doctrinal unity. Outward fellowship is to be based on the pure marks of the Church. Let us never forget that the Formula of Concord was written for the purpose of restoring unity among Lutherans...according to the Confessions there must be unity in all articles of faith. No best possible common denominator basis, but agreement in the doctrine in all its articles, also in the right use of the Holy Sacraments. Therefore, if we are convinced by facts that a church really does not share our confessional position in its publications, its preaching, teaching, and practice, then the only consistent attitude is to refuse fellowship. If that is not our stance, then we are unionists. A truly Lutheran church is a church which makes the Lutheran Confessions de facto the norma normata of doctrine and church practice.

Are we still ready to be Lutherans? Do we mean the same thing when we pledge loyalty to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions? Are we examining the doctrinal statements of the Confessions in order personally to find out whether they are really a pure exposition of God's Word, or do we merely use the Confessions as an instrument of ecclesiastical policy? Great question.²⁸

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