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Address communications to the Editor, Erich H. Heintzen, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois.

Business correspondence should be addressed to Arleigh Lutz, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois.

Church Polity and Fellowship in American Lutheranism

AUGUST R. SUELFLOW

The Reverend Mr. Suelflow is Director of Concordia Historical Institute, a position which he has held since 1948. Recently he completed a special two-year assignment as Secretary for the Synodical Survey Committee. From this rich background, he presented the following essay at Concordia Seminary, Springfield, in January, 1964. The Reverend Mr. Suelflow holds the S.T.M. degree from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, where he has served as guest lecturer. He is an author; a member of the Council of the Society of American Archivists; a vice-president of the Lutheran Historical Conference; and a member of the Board of Trustees of the American Microform Academy.

LUTHERAN intersynodical relationships have nearly always been discussed by Lutherans on the basis of their own personal feelings and on the basis of theology. Perhaps it is only on rare occasions that the polity of Lutheranism has been drawn into focus in such discussions. At the outset we should indicate that we are using the term "polity" in its widest possible sense. Thus, we would not use the term exclusively with reference to the constitutional provisions of the Lutheran churches in America, but also with respect to the form of government and synodical organizations in America as these affected fellowship between them.

It should further be made clear at the very outset that synodical organizations among Lutherans did not completely parallel the organization of similar bodies among Protestants in America. It was H. Richard Niebuhr in his *Social Sources of Denominationalism* who first pointed to the social, national and economic factors which influenced the denominational structure. While his emphasis upon these factors may be too heavy to fit the pattern of Lutheranism, yet there are aspects other than theological factors in the structure of Lutheranism which have caused some of the present fragmentation. It must be admitted that in the majority of cases, however, theological differences, nuances, and practices based upon the theology of the group caused many separations particularly during the middle of the 19th century.

Lutheranism as it emerged at the beginning of the 19th century was in a state of ferment. Patriarch Muhlenberg had been removed from the scene by almost two decades and a new leadership had come to the fore which sought to de-emphasize differences between denominations, thereby minimizing distinctive Lutheran

theology and emphasizing similarities. It may be suspected that Lutherans observed the successes experienced by such American denominations as the Congregational, Presbyterian and Methodist churches. Of course, the language used by these groups was English, even though their theology frequently vacillated between a Reformed and Arminian emphasis. It did not take Lutherans long after the Revolutionary War to feel that English-speaking Calvinism particularly was truly American. This caused some of them to look in that direction for the future, especially in developing similar techniques, practices and theology.

Emerging from a long period of colonial German Lutheran self-consciousness, particularly with respect to other Protestants, a tendency towards hasty Anglicanization and an acceptance of Reformed or Arminian theology became noticeable. With the importation of the "age of reason" and rationalism in theology, the Lutheran Confessions and Luther's Catechism became relatively unknown, not only to the lay members, but also to the clergymen. Of course, much of this was also due to the fact that these basic Lutheran resources were not generally available in English.

After the first few synods had been hesitantly organized, the concept of state-synods became quite prevalent. This tended to create a multiplicity of synodical organizations which in many instances coincided with state boundaries, and in others with natural barriers, such as mountains, rivers, and lakes. Almost all of the original synods formed in this period came into being, not because of theological factors (the Tennessee Synod is a notable exception), but because of physical barriers, limitations of travel and communication. It is also within this environment that the Missouri Synod had its origin in 1847. It had been hoped that the General Synod (organized in 1820) might become the embracive federation of independent synods. In fact, it was fairly successful in federating the synods. Just prior to the opening shot on Fort Sumter, it embraced approximately two-thirds of all Lutheran synods in America.

Sectionalism, party controversy, antipathies between east and west and north and south, culminating finally in the Civil War helped to prolong the tendency to establish geographically independent synods.

Dr. Philip Schaff, in his penetrating analysis of church life and activity in America a century ago, ignored the synodical structures completely in his series of lectures in Germany. Among his other evaluations, Schaff told his European audiences:

But even though a large number of members has fallen away, the Lutheran church has grown by leaps and bounds in the last 20 years, and if its inner condition and influence would correspond to its number, it would have to be considered one of the leading denominations in America. It spreads out over all central, western and a part of the southern states. According to the latest statistics it has 900 preachers and three

times as many congregations, has eight theological seminaries, five colleges, or at least their beginnings and is represented publicly through nine periodicals, four in English and five in German. It has without doubt the greatest mission field among all German denominations.

But the spiritual health among America's Lutherans was not good. Already at the turn of the century Dr. F. H. Quitman and others had introduced a brazen rationalism into the churches of the New York Ministerium through a most effective means, namely through a rewriting of the Catechism, hymnal and liturgy. From this subtle innovation, the members of the congregation had no effective recourse. These were the church books which were available in English for themselves and their children. The problem of language naturally contributed materially to the confusion. As early as 1797 Lutherans and Anglicans in New York had reached an accord on the establishment of new congregations, dividing the work on the basis of language, rather than theology. Further mergers were contemplated between the German Lutherans and German Reformed. Open communion was frequently practiced, and Lutheranism seemed to lose its distinctiveness by seeking common ground through rationalism, pietism and unionism. At least up to this point, one had dared to touch revisions of the Lutheran symbols. This was left for the next generation.

By 1845 (6 years after the arrival of the Saxons) Dr. S. S. Schmucker, Princeton trained, one of the most promising English speaking leaders of the Lutheran church, and president of the Gettysburg Seminary, wrote the United Church of Germany:

Now as to our doctrinal views, we confess without disguise, indeed confess it loudly and openly that the greatest majority of us are not Old Lutherans. . . . And in most of our church principles we stand on common ground with the *Unierte* [merged] Church of Germany. The distinctive views which separate the Old Lutherans and the Reformed Church we do not consider essential; and the tendency of the co-called "Old Lutheran" party seems to us to be behind our age. . . . The peculiar view of Luther on the bodily presence of the Lord in the Lord's Supper has long ago been abandoned by the great majority of our ancestors.²

A few years later he further clarified the position, particularly of the Gettysburg Seminary—the only training school for theological candidates for Eastern Lutherans—by emphasizing that such "absolute views" as "exorcism, the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the eucharist, private confession, baptismal regeneration, and immersion in baptism, as taught in Luther's Large Catechism," was no longer taught.³ Thus the way was paved for a drastic rewrite of the unaltered Augsburg Confession. Theologically, the two chief and major changes were made in Article IX on

Baptism, denying that regeneration takes place through baptism, and making the rite a mere "dedicatory" or "initiatory" act. The real presence of the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion was also denied in the alterations in Article X.⁴

Thus in this latter instance not polity, but theology initiated distinctive positions between "American Lutheranism" and "Old Lutheranism." But, as happens frequently, all Lutherans in America were not divided into these two opposing theological camps. A "mediating party" emerged somewhere in the center. As Dr. Philip Schaff pointed out:

In general, one may speak of three general tendencies in the American Lutheran Church, excluding insignificant and local divisions. For brevity's sake, we shall call them the Neo-Lutheran, the Old Lutheran, and the moderate Lutheran or Melancthonian.⁵

Schaff further analyzed the three parties as follows:

The Neo-Lutheran party originated out of a conflict and an amalgamation of Lutheranism with American Puritanism and Methodistic elements. It consists mostly of American-born Germans and proudly calls itself, in an emphatic sense, the American Lutheran Church. . . . It is to a large extent English and un-German, not only in language, but also in all its sympathies and antipathies.⁶

The "Old Lutheran" divisions has just recently immigrated to America from Germany. . . . They are still totally German and have not mixed in the least with the English and the American spirit. Even though outwardly they are progressing quite well, they are still strangers and foreigners in a new world. . . .⁷

The pastors of the Old Lutheran group are for the most well indoctrinated, faithful, conscientious, and self-sacrificing, but at the same time, if a fortunate consequence does not hinder them, they are extremely exclusive and narrow-minded people, [so much so] that they could hardly consider the most pious Reformed as a Christian and would not at any price partake of the Lord's Holy Supper with him. . . . They maintain church order and discipline in their congregations and are concerned about their schools. Compared with the latitudinarian and uncertain experimentation of the Neo-Lutherans they have the advantage of a firm principle, a well-formed dogmatic basis, and a logical consistency, even though at times their logical consistency would lead them in an entirely different direction from one of their fundamental points. They are not even in agreement among themselves. . . . And are vying with each other in their church papers from week to week with an antipathy and bitterness which in truth is not an honor to Lutheranism and Christianity and does not in the least command respect from the Anglo-American. . . .⁸

The Moderate Lutheran tendency standing as in the center of these two extremes, which in reality are associated by name only, really has the oldest American Lutheran tradition on its side, because the first missionaries came for the most out of the Halle orphanage and from the Spener and Francke schools of pietism which were known to be not very strict symbolically and really half Reformed. . . . It does not sympathize with the exclusive spirit of the Old Lutherans, since its leaders are too Americanized already and know the English Reformed Church better than to accuse them of heresy unhesitatingly. . . . A goodly number of their preachers, especially among the older men, have few firm convictions, are poorly educated, stagnant, and are much more concerned about building programs and politics than theology and church affairs. They follow almost blindly a few leading intellectuals.⁹

Within these multiple streams of Lutheranism the Saxon pilgrim fathers arrived, bringing their own determinations, thrusts and objectives, many of which ran counter to the several streams already in existence. In their determined protest against the unionistic alliances of the Reformed and Lutheran State Church with its rationalistic approach to Scripture and reckless abandonment of the Lutheran Confessions, the Saxon Lutherans among the "Old Lutherans" were even more purposeful in their profound adherence to Scripture as the inspired Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions as the expression and formulation of Biblical theology. But, having arrived almost a century after the early Lutherans, still being highly German and considered foreigners, their deep commitment to Scripture and the Confessions tended to isolate them still further from their Lutheran cousins. Hardly had they jumped out of the frying pan of European rationalism, when they found themselves embroiled in the fire of rationalistic-anti-confessional Lutheranism. Severe tensions were bound to develop.

Sometimes those who organized The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in 1847 have been termed withdrawing, isolationistic, disinterested in fellowship, and more concerned about their German-Lutheran ghetto than about ecumenical matters. Perhaps those who have been expressive along these lines have been more concerned with self-criticism of their own personal experiences and attitudes than those of the synodical structure.

The collapse of the Saxon church government and the erroneous concepts of the church and ministry through the expulsion of Martin Stephan brought abject chaos into the colonies.

It is entirely possible that the course of history would have been drastically changed if a letter written by George Albert Schieferdecker had received a different reply. The letter takes on intense significance because both the Saxon Lutherans and the Missouri Synod were accused of isolationism. Schieferdecker, one of the candidates of the Saxon immigration, wrote a detailed letter to

Dr. C. R. Demme (1795-1863), President of the Pennsylvania Ministerium, and friend of confessional Lutheranism, applying for membership in that body. In the course of the letter Schieferdecker pointed out the difficulties which the Saxons had experienced in Germany with the rationalistic state church, the reasons for immigrating and the difficulties encountered with the abject delusions through the collapse of Stephan's leadership. After this long, detailed account, he pointed to his academic training and background and concluded:

In order now, to take all the necessary steps which are required according to God's order, I am herewith applying for placement through the Lutheran Pennsylvania Synod as a candidate for the Holy Ministry or for a teaching position in an elementary or higher institution. The latter would be even more desirable for me since, in comparison with the pastoral ministry, a lesser degree of wisdom and experience seems to be required. I am saying this in view of the fact that I consider myself a novice with respect to my natural and spiritual age. I would, naturally, gladly subject myself to an examination of your honorable Synod.¹⁰

What would have happened if Dr. Demme had received Candidate Schieferdecker? Would the other Saxon clergymen and congregations have joined later? Was this a "feeler"? Dr. Demme's reply is highly significant. It is unfortunate that the precise text of the Demme reply has not been preserved. However, the original of the Schieferdecker letter contains a brief note by Dr. Demme, giving the gist of his answer. In addition, his presidential report to the Pennsylvania Ministerium the following year contains this note with respect to Schieferdecker's application:

He renders a most interesting account of his spiritual experiences and development. In my answer, I informed him that, in order to accede to his wishes, it would be necessary for him to appear personally before this body, and encouraged him that he join one of the western synods of our church.¹¹

It may be noted also that when Friedrich Wyneken originally arrived in Baltimore in 1838 he was received into membership of the Pennsylvania Ministerium and remained in its service for several years thereafter. In fact, in the same convention referred to above, Wyneken appealed for several additional copies of Scripture.¹² It is entirely possible that this rapport, if continued, might have materially altered the face of Lutheran synodical history.

Further steps of synodical affiliation on the part of the Saxons did not take place too rapidly. In fact, the initiative for the formation of the Missouri Synod did not come from the Saxon Lutherans at all, as it has sometimes been assumed erroneously.

Actually, the roots of the formation of Missouri can be attributed to the Ohio Synod, an extension or off-shoot of the Pennsylvania Ministerium. Several of the Loehe emissaries had joined the Ohio (1818) and a few the Michigan Synod. (1840) But neither one of these two synods met the theological or confessional standards with which the Loehe men had been ingrafted. The men in the Ohio Synod took decisive action in September 1845 meeting in Cleveland, Ohio. The chief problem under consideration by the nine men in attendance concerned itself with the language of instruction used in the Ohio Synod Seminary and the closely allied problem of confessionalism. The Loehe men sought a resolution condemning the General Synod for its lax confessional emphasis. Moreover, the Ohio Synod's formula for the administration of Holy Communion had a definite Reformed flavor through the insertion of the word, "Jesus said." Further, the Loehe men felt that the ordinands should be required to pledge themselves to the Lutheran Confessions. But when these demands were not met, the Loehe men drew up a "Document of Separation" in which they revealed their position, both with respect to schisms in the church and their confessional adherence. They declared:

It is certainly true that the undersigned bear a heartfelt displeasure toward every willfull and factious separation; moreover, the misgivings, yes, the possible dangers connected with a just separation from a synodical organization are not concealed from them. However, there are two reasons which make it a matter of conscience with us, even though our spirits are reluctant and troubled, to separate ourselves from the existing Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Ohio and also from both District synods. The first of these two reasons is clearly ecclesiastical and confessional. . . . The integrity and determination of the Synod appears doubtful with reference to its ecclesiastical disposition and tendency and its lack of decided resistance against the false union of our time.¹³

Furthermore, the group demanded the Ohio Synod subscribe to all the Symbols of the Lutheran Church, to bear testimony against the false doctrine of the Sacrament of the General Synod, to inaugurate a thoroughgoing reform of the system of clergy examinations, to pledge candidates to all the symbols of the Lutheran Church at their ordination, and to discontinue serving Reformed-Lutheran congregations. When these demands were not met, the Loehe emissaries turned to the Lutherans in Missouri for fellowship, abandoning their membership in the Ohio Synod. Thus the second preliminary meeting toward the organization of the Missouri Synod was held in the early part of May, 1846, in St. Louis. As this conference the first draft of the Synodical constitution was adopted. A third preliminary conference was held shortly thereafter in July, 1846, in Fort Wayne, culminating the following April in the formation of the Missouri Synod.

One must underscore that the Missouri Synod was organized on the basis of theological and confessional cohesion, unanimity and fellowship. The time seemed to be ripe in American Lutheranism for some forms of separation from existing bodies which were engaged in an internal struggle as they were seeking confessional and theological certainty. The geographic distances between Missouri and Pennsylvania seemed to suggest the formation of a separate mid-western synod apart from the Pennsylvania Ministerium. But this was slow in coming, until the major impetus had been supplied by disgruntled "Old Lutherans" of the Ohio and Michigan Synods. It may therefore be averred that even as the Loehe emissaries who had been directed by their mentor in Germany to join existing Lutheran synods and not to organize separate fellowships, so the Saxons also, after a timid, hesitant approach to the Pennsylvania Ministerium, awaited further developments before establishing a separate church body.

Though originally a heterogeneous group, there was a complete meeting of minds based upon a heavy emphasis on the historic Lutheran Confessions as the theological platform and this became the root for the establishment of the Missouri Synod.

But not all "Old Lutherans" were to gravitate into that camp. Pastor John A. A. Grabau, who had emerged together with his adherents through the same type of anti-confessional rationalism in Germany, immigrated to America approximately the same time as the Saxons. As early as 1845 Grabau had already established a Synod which he called "The Synod of the Lutheran Church Emigrated from Prussia." Initial contacts favorable for both Buffalo and Missouri had been established. One of the Grabau congregations called Theodore Brohm, a Saxon, in 1842 to New York. Another called Pastor Ernst Moritz Buerger to the present Tonawanda, New York. But then the belligerent and bitter controversy pertaining to Grabau's exalted concept of the ministry and the narrowly defined concept of the church positions which were rather closely allied with those once held by Martin Stephan caused a separation between Buffalo and Missouri, although both were staunch adherents of the Confessions.

But even after Missouri was established it had no intentions to remain aloof and isolated. At this point, it is rather significant to refer to the clarion call issued by Pastor C. F. W. Walther to all Lutherans in America to rally behind the Augsburg Confession and to establish a single Lutheran church in America. It was Walther's position that if it was impossible for a Lutheran organization to pledge itself to all the Confessions contained in the Book of Concord, it might be advisable to settle simply for a pledge to the Augsburg Confession. In a letter to Jacob Stirewalt, he commented:

Yet, the fact that the Symbols written after the Augsburg Confession are not officially used seems to me a deficiency in the constitution of the church and its confessional basis. Still,

I am far from advising anyone to make a violent attempt to force through the adoption of all Symbols as a legitimate basis of doctrine. The most unsuspecting affair becomes suspicious when it is forced upon men.¹⁴

But at this time the other Confessions had already been abandoned to a considerable degree by most Lutherans. The final one, the Augsburg Confession, was at stake as it was being attacked by lethargy on the one hand and a determined effort to re-write it as indicated in the "American Rescension of the Augsburg Confession" of 1855. To salvage what was salvageable Walther issued a prophetic appeal through the pages of *Lehre und Wehre*:

So we venture openly to inquire: would not meetings, held at intervals, by such members of churches as call themselves Lutheran and acknowledge and confess without reservation that the unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530 is the pure and true statement of the doctrine of sacred Scripture and is also their own belief, promote and advance the efforts towards the final establishment of one single Evangelical Lutheran Church of America? We for our part would be ready with all our heart to take part in such a Conference of truly believing Lutherans wherever and whenever such a Conference would be held, pursuant to the wishes of the majority of the participants; at the same time we can promise in advance the support of numerous theologians and laymen to whom the welfare of our precious Evangelical Lutheran Church in this new fatherland is equally a matter of deepest heartfelt yearning, and with whom we have discussed the thoughts here expressed.¹⁵

The appeal was accompanied by success and four conferences were conducted between 1856 and 1859. Interest and attendance ran high. The Augsburg Confession itself served as the basis for the discussions. Sessions were opened and closed with the singing of a hymn, prayer, the recitation of the Apostles' Creed and the benediction. Truly, these sessions were of an "intersynodical" nature, seeking to use all deliberate haste to form one single, united Lutheran Church in America. But unfortunately the Lutheran situation in America, partially prompted by personalities, was not conducive to fruition of the plan.

In spite of this, the polarity of the Missouri Synod became more solid as time went on. A system of theological training had been established by the Missouri Synod, attendance at pastoral conferences designed to study theology was made compulsory, and theological publications were issued. Also, a system of theological supervision was provided for with the synodical president initially in charge. This later became more decentralized as these responsibilities were transferred to the synodical vice-presidents, then to the district presidents, and finally to the circuit counselors. But through-

out this entire supervisory system seeking uniformity and cohesion on the basis of a firm confessional platform, exegetical freedom was allowed, and the publication of an "official exegesis" did not seem desirable.

Over the course of years congregations, pastors and synods were constrained to redefine their theological integrity in terms of new challenges of integration. Often Lutherans happened to be more ready to become culturally and even religiously integrated in the community than to express a continued concern for the preservation of their integrity. At other times, in order to provide for a certain immunity from the negative aspects of community acculturation, higher walls of theological integrity were constructed than Biblical theology demanded. Thus, a veering away from Lutheran moorings both through an exclusive insistence upon the preservation of its theological integrity, and through conscious efforts to bring the Gospel to bear upon the community caused shifts of emphases which were sometimes not easily retractable.

One of the first major theological controversies striking the majority of Lutherans in America, namely "American Lutheranism," caused a division of major proportions and produced the General Council in 1866 separate from the older federation, the General Synod. It may be presumed that the "Free Conferences" of the 1850's contributed to the formation of the General Council. Curious, then, that the Missouri Synod did not fully enter the negotiations in the organization of the Council. Missouri considered the venture premature and felt that more could be achieved by continuing free conferences. Representing Missouri as a delegate at the constituting convention was the Rev. J. A. F. W. Mueller who opened the fourth session of the Council with prayer and presented a paper.¹⁶

Ultimately the Council's vague position on chiliasm, secret societies, and pulpit and altar fellowship caused several other synods to gravitate towards Missouri.

An interesting sidelight appears from the point of view of polity and fellowship in correspondence between Walther and Charles Porterfield Krauth. In 1856 Walther took the Pittsburgh Synod to task for having adopted a resolution on the Augsburg Confession which could be variously interpreted. However, when Dr. Krauth wrote Walther the intent of the resolution and supplied detail of background, Krauth countered:

Permit me . . . to direct your attention to some facts familiar to all the Synod, and essential to the complete understanding of the Resolutions, but of which in the nature of the case you could not be aware, and the absence of a knowledge which has given shape to your strictures on them in the last *Lutheraner*.¹⁷

After Krauth explained, Walther was quick to withdraw his earlier misgivings which had appeared in *Der Lutheraner*.¹⁸ He

made his public retraction a month later in *Der Lutheraner*.¹⁹ In his brief preliminary remarks, prior to publication of the letter, he expressed his great joy at its receipt and gladly gave his "public admission that he had been in error."

After several colloquies were conducted between a number of Synods not in fellowship with the Missouri Synod, the ground was laid for establishing the Synodical Conference. Walther was overjoyed at the prospect of forming a federation of Synods on a common confessional-theological platform, and of establishing a single Lutheran church in America.²⁰

The Wisconsin, Illinois, Norwegian, and Missouri Synods all responded favorably to the invitation to form a Conference. Only two preliminary meetings were required. The "Plan of Union" was adopted by the representatives and referred back to the participating synods for ratification.

Article III of the original constitution is especially significant since it enunciates the goal of the Synodical Conference as the instrument by which all Lutheran synods in America ultimately could be united. The text originally read:

To give outward expression of the unity of spirit of the respective synods; to encourage and strengthen one another in faith and in confession; to further the unity in doctrine and practice and to remove whatever might threaten to disturb this unity; to cooperate in matters of mutual interest; to strive for the establishment of synodical boundaries according to territorial lines, assuming in advance that the language does not separate; to unite all Lutheran synods in America in one orthodox American Lutheran church.²¹

Perhaps there is some significance attached to the 1944 revision of the final objective of the Conference. At that time the phrase was altered to read:

To strive for true unity in doctrine and practice among Lutheran church bodies.²²

With profound regret one must report that the halcyon days of the Conference were short lived. The Predestinarian Controversy erupted and caused intense consternation between two of its members, the Ohio and Missouri Synods. Colloquies were conducted between the exponents of the two sides of the issue, but unity could not be restored. The differences became public when Walther's opponent began to issue a separate publication to air his views. In rapid succession this was followed by an entire series of conferences, colloquies and meetings on a synod-wide and regional basis in 1880 and 1881. Finally, in its convention of 1881, Missouri adopted its own formulation on predestination known as the "Thirteen Theses."²³ Subscription to these theses was mandatory.

Inter-synodical conferences in the early part of the 20th century were designed to overcome the difficulties which had occurred.

However, by this time the crystallization of synodical lines becomes quite noticeable. There was a detectable tendency to operate through "official" channels rather than through the spontaneous paths which marked negotiations of this type during the middle of the 19th century. The fact that the super federation, the Synodical Conference, was also drawn into the picture to approve steps taken in the deliberations made any movement seemingly more cumbersome. Finally, by 1906 these "free conferences" were discontinued as useless.

The "grass roots" took the initiative to overcome the old differences in 1915. Clergy members of about seven synods serving in the twin cities area of Minnesota met unofficially from time to time to explore the differences. Finally, a document entitled *Zur Einigung* was signed by 555 pastors, representing the Minnesota, Ohio, Missouri, Iowa, Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Michigan Synods. The success seemed to be overwhelming! Promptly a letter was dispatched from the St. Paul Conference to the Missouri Synod Convention (1917) requesting that the Synod appoint an official union committee and take any steps "to bring about complete unity of doctrine in the several synods".²⁴

The Convention commended the efforts of the Conference and conceded that negotiations "have reached such proportions that they can no longer be considered a private matter" and elected a committee to examine the document submitted and to further explore the matter. This established the first official "Union Committee" of the Missouri Synod.

Ultimately through these discussions the "Inter-synodical" or "Chicago Theses" emerged. A high spot was reached in the Convention of 1926 when fellowship based on theological agreement seemed to be attainable. By 1929, however, the Synod took another profound look at the theses and rejected them completely because it deemed them inadequate, ambiguous and irrelevant.²⁵ The American Lutheran Church emerged in 1930 on the basis of the theses.

Since that time, and time does not allow us to pursue this story further here, the Missouri Synod has operated with an official Committee on Lutheran Union with varying degrees of success. Sometimes several such committees were in existence simultaneously, one dealing with internal problems of the Synodical Conference, and the other with external theological matters. This also had a tendency to create further confusion and difficulties so that the Cleveland Convention, upon the recommendation of the Survey Commission, established its present Commission on Theology and Church Relations. It is hoped that this coordinated group may provide the theological study and investigations aimed at internal and external areas of negotiations and deliberation with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions as its heart and core.

Administratively, the Missouri Synod operated a decentralized form of government, placing prime responsibility for work, action

service and outreach on the local congregation. Initiative had to rest with the congregation, rather than with synodical officials, executives, boards and commissions. In some instances this placed heavy burdens upon those congregations particularly which were located on the frontier. When German immigration became increasingly heavier and local congregations and pastors no longer could cope with the problems, the Synod established its immigrant mission, with representatives in Hamburg, New York, Baltimore and in other local ports of entry. Immigrant work brought amazing results as the growth figures of the Synod indicate. Thus, during the period of the 1850's the increase was 343%; 1860's 154%; 1880, 332%; but dropped to 39% in the 1890's. The low was reached in the decade of the 1910's, with a 14% increase. The decade of the 1950's again reflected a 65% increase.

But the continued rate of immigration, in which the Missouri Synod gained vast numbers of German Lutherans (perhaps more than any other Lutheran organization), also brought with it certain problems. Evidence seems to indicate that acculturation and Americanization were somewhat retarded because of the continued infusions received from "our own kind" which may have postponed the process of integration. The immigration continued to serve as a "preservative" or an immunization against the necessity of tackling problems caused by environment. One needs to think only of the "theological erosion" which most American Protestantism experienced during the early part of the 20th century. But Missouri was quite immune to it. This erosion is defined in terms of a loss of identity and the identification of the churches with American culture. With its lack of theological certainty and coinciding of church and world, a bland Protestantism emerged.

It may be conceded that Missouri kept itself somewhat aloof from these degenerating influences, through a form of isolation which was provided through its intense missionary zeal directed first to the German and later to other foreign tongued immigrants.

But when Missouri finally emerged, perhaps reluctantly, it came forth with a much greater sense of stability, strength, and theological certainty than is found in general Protestantism. Perhaps it is a combination of these factors which caused Hudson to declare:

The 'growing edge' of Protestantism would seem to lie outside of the circle of 'co-operative Protestantism.' The two major bodies that had striking records of growth during the 1940-54 period were the Southern Baptist Convention and The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, neither of which belong to the National Council of Churches.²⁶

After evaluating various possibilities, he concludes:

The final prospect for a vigorous renewal of Protestant life and witness rests with the Lutheran churches which had overcome much of their fragmentation by 1960 and had

grouped themselves into three main bodies. All had exhibited an ability to grow during the post-World War II years, with The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod making the greatest gains. The Lutheran churches are in the fortunate position of having been, in varying degrees, insulated from American life for a long period of time. As a result, they have been less subject to the theological erosion which so largely stripped other denominations of an awareness of their continuity with a historic Christian tradition. Thus, the resources of the Christian past have been more readily available to them, and this fact suggests that they may have an increasingly important role in a Protestant recovery. Among the assets immediately at hand among the Lutherans are a confessional tradition, a surviving liturgical structure, and a sense of community which, however much it may be the product of cultural factors, may make it easier for them than for most Protestant denominations to recover the 'integrity of church membership' without which Protestants are ill-equipped to participate effectively in the dialog of a pluralistic society.²⁷

CONCLUSION

It was Dr. C. F. W. Walther who directed himself to the theological differences of church government, as they affected unity. He reported on the first free Conference in 1856 as follows:

For acceptance of the Augsburg Confession with reservations is no acceptance of the Confession but a relinquishment of it. Because of this we cannot expect the salvation of our church here (in America) from the General Synod. An outward union, provided for by a constitution is not at all what we need. If one single Evangelical Lutheran Church, strong in unity, is to arise, this will occur only through the unity in faith, through the awakening of a consciousness of the presence of such unity and through a rallying around a single confession, as around a treasure which must be mutually adhered to and defended.²⁸

As long as synodical boundaries, traditions, and view points were somewhat in a state of flux, matters of Lutheran union and fellowship could be explored with greater flexibility and ease. Synodical crystallization followed. Thereafter, it became increasingly more difficult to explore the theological differences. As time went on, individual tendencies and traditions encrusted the membership of a synod. The controversies separating Lutherans today were not always clearcut issues affecting the Lutheran Confessions. This can be readily seen by the differences which existed between the "Old Lutherans" which had formally adopted all the Confessions with conviction and dedicated themselves to their preservation.

This causes one to raise some additional questions on contemporary issues.

1. Since doctrinal documents or statements were not always produced as a result of achieving understanding and agreement in theological matters, must negotiations result in the preparation of new documents, carefully worded, and subscribed to by the negotiators and synods?
2. As has been noted, the problem of integrity and integration which places tensions on the core message of a church body, and the method or manner in which this message is brought to the environment, seems crucial for an understanding of the fellowship problem. It is essential that we ask ourselves what the basic message of Lutheranism is in this "post-Protestant" era. How can a church body which has the message of salvation by faith alone as revealed in Scripture alone bring this message to a rebellious self-centered and unwilling environment without yielding any part of the message?
3. The problem of authority in the church will require ongoing study. What constitutes such authority? Is it in Scripture, and if so, to what degree can exegetical freedom be maintained? Must the theological formulations be confined to the Lutheran Confessions? Was the "canon of the Confessions" closed in 1580? Does a Lutheran subscribe to the Confessions because, or only "insofar as", they agree with Scripture? Further, what is the role and function of theological statements which have either been formulated unilaterally by a single synod, or cooperatively by a group of Lutheran churches? What is the role and function of Synodical convention resolutions with respect to member congregations, to clergy, to teachers, and to those outside of a church body? How can *publica doctrina* be defined?
4. Is the statement by Edmund Schlink apropos?:

To be bound by the Confession necessarily implies for dogmatics the obligation to continue in the act of confessing; for the consensus of the church in the doctrine of the Gospel is and remains until Christ's return a dissensus from the world. A dogmatics that would in an unrelated manner consider only those heresies through which the devil assailed the church centuries ago, but would not be alert to the constantly changing disguises of the devil's destructive purpose in the invention of ever-new heresies, and would not see through the ever-new attacks of the evil powers under ever-new and surprising forms—such a dogmatics would imperceptibly but helplessly fall prey to the attitudes and attacks of this world. Contrary to the Confession is that dogmatics which does not teach the Gospel as witnessed by the Confessions in demarcation against newly arising heresies. Even the most solemn reaffirmation of the Confessions may be a denial of them, if the errors of the day are passed over

in silence. Hence no Confession of the church may be regarded as definitive in the sense of precluding the possibility of further Confessions. All the Confessions had their origin in confrontation with errors—this fact is inherent in the very concept of a Confession, as the Confessions themselves and particularly the programmatic introduction to the Formula of Concord expressly declare—and to admit this is to acknowledge that the Book of Concord cannot be regarded as the final and conclusive Confession. At the very least the church, confronted with new heresies, will have to furnish up-to-date and binding interpretations of her official Confessions. But also beyond this we must soberly reckon with the possibility, perhaps even the necessity, of meeting the invasion of new errors with the formulation and validation of new Confessions.²⁹

Assuming that Schlink is correct, that there are times when Satan has stirred up new heresies which require new confessional statements, how are these to be formulated and adopted? Is the polity of the Missouri Synod equal to the task? Article VII of the Synodical Constitution, adopted in 1853 and radically revised in 1917, seems to indicate that it is impossible for the Missouri Synod to meet such a requirement today. The article states:

In its relation to its members [defined according to Article V "Membership" consists of "congregations, ministers . . . , and teachers . . . , who confess and accept the Confessional Basis of Article II"] Synod is not an ecclesiastical government exercising legislative or coercive powers, and with respect to the individual congregation's right of self-government it is but an advisory body. Accordingly, no resolution of Synod imposing anything upon the individual congregation is of binding force if it is not in accordance with the Word of God or if it appears to be inexpedient as far as the conditions of a congregation is concerned.³⁰

Since Synod is not "an ecclesiastical government exercising legislative or coercive powers" in relationship to its members—congregations, pastors and teachers—it seems that no theological statement of any kind outside of those referred to in Article II can ever become binding upon the membership without constitutional changes. Thus, it may suggest that The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has arrived in the midst of the proverbial horns of the dilemma. It has hamstrung itself constitutionally on the one hand and feels the compulsion for theological unanimity on the other. How can it extricate itself from the dilemma and continue to work for the establishment of a single Lutheran church in America?

Historic Lutheranism continues to have the only answer for ills and problems of our day. Its integrity must be redefined in our age as it has been in previous ones. Its past strength was produced

by it. But it dare not pass by any opportunities to witness and be integrated. Its future lies in walking the tight rope between preserving and giving, between integrity and integration.

NOTES

1. August R. Suelflow, "Nietzsche and Schaff on American Lutheranism," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, XXIII (January, 1951) 147-148.
2. *Zeitschrift fuer Protestantismus und Kirche*, XI (1846), 263 ff.
3. S. S. Schmucker, "Vocation of the American Lutheran Church," *Evangelical Review*, II (April 1851), 509.
4. Vergilius Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology* (New York: The Century Co., 1927), p. 357.
5. August R. Suelflow, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
6. ——. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
7. ——. *Ibid.*
8. ——. *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.
9. ——. *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.
10. G. A. Schieferdecker, manuscript letter to "The honorable Dr. Demme," 3 pages, postmarked August 1840.
11. Dr. Demme, *Verhandlung der Deutschen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Synode von Pennsylvanien, gehalten zu Harrisburg in der Trinitatus-Woche, vom 5. bis 10. Juni 1841*. (Sumnytaun: Gedruckt by Inos Benner, 1841), p. 7.
12. See also his report on mission activities for the Ministerium of that body in 1839, *CHIQ*, XX (October 1947), 124 ff.
13. *Kirchliche Mitteilungen aus und ueber Nord-Amerika*, IV (1846), No. 2, column 4. Translation by A.R.S. See also the English text in *Lutheran Standard*, III (18 February 1846), 3, which is incomplete and stilted.
14. C. F. W. Walther, letter to Jacob Stirewalt (original letter in Concordia Historical Institute archives).
15. *Lehre und Wehre*, II (January 1856), 3-6.
16. *Proceedings of the Convention held by Representatives from various Evangelical Lutheran Synods in the United States and Canada accepting the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, 1866* (Pittsburgh: Bakewell & Marthens, Printers, 1867), p. 8 and 14.
17. Charles P. Krauth, manuscript letter to C. F. W. Walther, Pittsburgh, Pa., 8 July 1856 (original in Concordia Historical Institute archives).
18. C. F. W. Walther, *Der Lutheraner*, "Bekanntnis zur Augsburgerischen Confession mit Vorbehalt," XII (1 July 1856), 180.
19. ——. *Der Lutheraner*, "Berichtigung," XII (29 July 1856), 198.
20. C. F. W. Walther, *Missouri Synod Proceedings, 1869*, pp. 26-30.
21. *Denkschrift enthaltend eine eingehende Darlegung der Gruende weshalb die zur Synodal-Conferenz der Ev.-Luth.-Kirche von Nordamerika zusammentretenden Synoden . . .* (Columbus, Ohio: Druck von Schulze und Gassmann (1871), p. 5.
22. Synodical Conference constitution, 1944, Article 42.
23. "Thirteen Theses." *Missouri Synod Proceedings, 1881*, pp. 33-35.
24. *Missouri Synod Proceedings*, English edition, 1917, pp. 76-77.
25. *Missouri Synod Proceedings, 1929*, pp. 110-113.
26. Winthrop S. Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 165.
27. ——. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
28. "Die allgemeine Conferenz" *Der Lutheraner*, XIII (21 October 1856), p. 34.
29. Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, 1961), p. 31.
30. *Handbook of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1963 edition*, XIII, p. 3.