

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

By Martin P. Janke

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To answer the question, “What is keeping the WELS and the LC-MS apart?” it is necessary to go back to May 1960, when after years of discussions with the LC-MS our Commission on Doctrinal Matters, as our Commission on Inter-Church Relations (CICR) was then called, “felt constrained to declare that an impasse exists between the two synods in the matter of fellowship principles.” Scripture teaches, and our Theses on Fellowship state, that “church (confessional) 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.” In August of the following year (1961) our Wisconsin Synod in convention suspended fellowship relations with The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

This was an action which our synod did not take lightly. There were those who predicted dire things for our synod if that termination were ever to come about. And when, by God’s grace, our synod was given the strength to act in obedience to God’s Word, we did indeed suffer the loss of some pastors, teachers and congregations. There were very few families who were not directly affected by this action, since members of our synod often had relatives, frequently close relatives, in the Missouri Synod and vice versa. Church work which had been carried on together with the LC-MS both in our country and abroad could now no longer be a joint effort. But the Lord did not forsake us, as he never forsakes those who dare to act in obedience to his Word. Our synod has since that termination enjoyed a quarter century of unparalleled growth under God’s hand of blessing.

This year it is 25 years since that long-cherished fellowship was terminated. Much has happened also in the Missouri Synod during this quarter century, some of it good, some not so good.

When it began to look as though a large element in Missouri was determined, under God, to return the LC-MS to orthodoxy, our CICR began sending observers to the conventions of the LC-MS. At the 1969 convention in Denver, Dr. J.A.O. Preus, the choice of the conservatives, was elected president. But it was also at that convention that fellowship was declared with the American Lutheran Church (ALC). It became apparent almost at once that this action was ill-advised, but it took ten years before another LC-MS convention, held in St. Louis, declared that “the LC-MS is not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the ALC.” As president, Preus undertook a “housecleaning” of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. Professors and students who left established their own seminary (Seminex) with Dr. John Tietjen, the former president of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, as its president. This group later severed its relations with the LC-MS and, together with those of a like mind, formed the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), one of the church bodies now involved with the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the American Lutheran Church in the formation of a new Lutheran church body, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

But we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves. We mentioned earlier that our synod has been sending official observers to the conventions of the Missouri Synod for many years. The reports of those observers over the years make it crystal clear why our WELS, which broke with Missouri on the doctrine of confessional fellowship, has not found it possible to renew fellowship relations with Missouri.

Our observers in New Orleans in 1973 found something for which to thank God. They reported: “With Christian joy your observers took note of the firm and uncompromising stand on the issue of the authority of Scripture.” But they also realized that more was needed. The report goes on:

It is our hope and prayer that it may be followed up by additional steps, taken with equal resoluteness and firmness in returning to a fully scriptural position also on fellowship principles, relations and practices (e.g., re: ALC fellowship, LCUSA [Lutheran Council in the U.S.A.] membership, divergent fellowship practices of daughter mission churches) and on the mission of the church.

If the present LC-MS convention victory on the authority of Scripture should at all be compromised by unwarranted delay in disciplinary action or by a misguided desire still to reconcile positions (the historical-exegetical and the historical-critical approaches to Scripture) which cannot be reconciled, it will become most difficult, maybe even impossible, to win the same victory a second time.

Furthermore, it dare not be forgotten that Scripture's position concerning its own authority (its plenary inspiration and full inerrancy) and the scriptural position on confessional fellowship (that it requires full unity in doctrine and practice) are interlocking issues. A sound scriptural position on either of these issues cannot be maintained for any length of time without maintaining it on the other likewise. Less than ever can this be done under the impact of present-day false ecumenism.

Our observers at the Anaheim convention in 1975 found little to be optimistic about. On the basis of their report, our CICR reported the following to the 1975 convention of our synod:

With regret our Commission must report that...the actions of the Anaheim Convention failed to indicate that the Missouri Synod is returning to a scriptural understanding of fellowship principles and practices (e.g., continued ALC fellowship and LCUSA membership, continued approval of divergent fellowship practice of sister mission churches, continuation of a joint LCUSA campus ministry in accordance with the Communion agreement set up in the past for military and institutional chaplains).

Dallas was the site of the 1977 LC-MS convention. On the strength of the report of its observers, our CICR began its report to our synod by citing a number of hopeful signs.

Renewed doctrinal concern was clearly reflected at this convention in its workbook, its resolutions, its elections, its essay, Bible study, and devotions. Its workbook presented and recommended a considerable number of scriptural studies on controverted issues. Included among the resolutions were decisions to proclaim a "fellowship in protest" with the American Lutheran Church, action on the *Lutheran Book of Worship* which was deferred pending establishment of its doctrinal soundness, a rejection of the historical-critical method of scriptural interpretation, and clear witness against the doctrinal errors bound up with the charismatic movement....Candidates which were considered to be doctrinally concerned were consistently elected to various synodical offices. The essay, Bible study, and devotions were pointed toward concern for pure doctrine.

But then came the sour note:

Three factors, however, appeared to keep the Dallas convention from carrying through this doctrinal concern with consistency:

1. In various resolutions a reluctance to give up unscriptural ecumenical relationships inconsistent with these doctrinal concerns prevailed. This became evident in the convention's decisions to continue participation in the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. (LCUSA). Such participation involves continued comity arrangements for founding missions, carrying out

campus and institutional ministries, awarding Pro Deo et Patria awards in the Lutheran scouting program, and administering the chaplaincy ministry in the armed forces. It made provisions for training future pastors in Canada at the Saskatoon Seminary jointly conducted by the ALC and LCA Canadian-affiliated church bodies. The convention formally commended and supported the mission work of partner churches affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation.

2. This inconsistency of the Missouri convention appeared to be due to widespread unclarity concerning the scriptural concept of confessional fellowship. For example, confessional fellowship was restricted to pulpit and altar fellowship with no clear recognition that all joint worship and church work require unity in doctrine and practice, and that confessional fellowship must cease with those who reveal themselves as persistent errorists.
3. There was an obvious variance with respect to fellowship practices on the part of individual pastors, circuit counselors, district presidents, as well as overseas missionaries. Joint participation, for example, in wedding services conducted by Missouri Synod pastors with clergymen of other faiths was condemned by synodical resolution but staunchly defended by others as commendable pastoral concern and good Lutheran testimony. Doctrinal concern, however, remains meaningless if it is not followed up by doctrinal discipline, and the widespread variance in fellowship practice within the Missouri Synod will make such discipline exceedingly difficult.

In its report on the 1975 Anaheim convention of the Missouri Synod our Commission had reiterated that a return to scriptural principles of church fellowship, once shared in the Synodical Conference, would have to go hand-in-hand with the Missouri Synod's reaffirmation of the full authority of the Holy Scriptures if it is to regain the status of a truly confessional Lutheran church body. We prayerfully hope that the proposed study will result in a presentation that will be scriptural in every respect.

Our Commission is of the conviction that such a scriptural presentation on fellowship will need to be followed up with a termination of fellowship with the American Lutheran Church and a withdrawal from participation in the LCUSA before a resumption of formal doctrinal discussions between our two church bodies would become meaningful.

On May 1, 1978, five representatives of our commission took part in an informal meeting with Missouri Synod officials at St. Louis, Missouri. Our commission gave the following report on its meeting to the 1979 convention of our synod:

The Missouri Synod is attempting to restore a correct position in its midst relative to the authority and external clarity of the Scriptures. On the other hand, the Missouri Synod seems to have lost sight of the fact that it cannot long maintain such a position on the Scriptures as long as it retains fellowship with groups that repudiate this position (e.g., the ALC, the LCUSA, and the LWF [Lutheran World Federation], with which various Missouri Synod mission sister-churches are affiliated), and as long as it does not exercise doctrinal discipline on those in its own midst who openly oppose the Synod's doctrinal position. No plans were made for further discussions between the Missouri Synod and representatives of our Commission.

In 1979 the LC-MS convention was held in St. Louis. With observers again on the scene, our commission was able to report to the 1979 convention of our synod: "The St. Louis convention adopted many resolutions that express strong doctrinal concerns." These are then listed. The report goes on: "Missing, however, was any action on the part of the LC-MS convention suggesting disciplinary measures where these and other doctrinal concerns are compromised or ignored."

Other significant happenings at this convention:

1. No statement on fellowship was submitted to the convention.
2. Another two years of “fellowship in protest” with the ALC.
3. A motion to continue participation in the LCUSA passed unanimously. The LC-MS will thus continue to do joint church work in a number of areas together with the ALC, the LCA and the AELC.
4. Minor, but to be noted, was that Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in a public ceremony bestowed a Doctor of Letters degree on Bishop Gerhard Rost (SELK—Germany) in absentia, citing him as a great churchman who under difficult conditions had taken a firm stand on Holy Scripture. The honorary degree is, of course, a way of cementing the fellowship relations between the LC-MS and the SELK, a body with which we could not establish fellowship because of its compromises on the doctrine of the clarity and the inerrancy of Scripture.

It is clear that the LC-MS has not as yet found its way back to the fellowship principles once laid down in the Brief Statement. 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 the Synod returns to fellowship principles that are thoroughly scriptural.

Again in 1981 the LC-MS convention met in St. Louis. Our commission heard the report of its observers and then reported to our synod that the LC-MS had resolved to “declare that it is not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the ALC.” The report continued:

Practical guidelines to assist the officials, pastors, teachers, congregations and individuals in the Synod in determining which practices and activities are appropriate to the various levels of inter-Lutheran and inter-Christian relationships in which the Synod is involved were requested from the CTCR [Commission on Theology and Church Relations] by the convention. Stating that “it values the opportunity provided by the Council to work toward doctrinal consensus and to engage in joint efforts to meet human needs,” the Missouri convention resolved to continue its membership in LCUSA.

Our commission commented:

With respect to the convention’s request for “practical guidelines” relative to “inter-Lutheran and inter-Christian relationships,” your Commission is of the opinion that the Missouri Synod will first need to regain a clear understanding of what the Scriptures teach concerning “church fellowship.” Restricting “church fellowship” to “altar and pulpit fellowship,” as was clearly evident from the Missouri Synod resolutions in regard to fellowship, will hardly help a church body draw up scriptural guidelines for inter-Lutheran and inter-Christian relationships. The decision of the Missouri Synod to continue its membership in the LCUSA unfortunately underscores the widespread involvement of the Missouri Synod in unionistic endeavors. The LCUSA serves as the coordinating agency for its member churches in various joint endeavors. Many of these joint endeavors have to do with the church’s function of proclaiming God’s Word. [Here many of these joint endeavors are listed.]

As indicated before, your Commission recognizes the significant step taken by the Missouri Synod in its termination of “altar and pulpit” fellowship with the ALC. It is to be hoped that in its further study of unionism and church fellowship the Missouri Synod will arrive at a concept of “church fellowship” which fully reflects the scriptural teaching on this matter. Beyond that it is our prayer that the Missouri Synod will by God’s grace see the urgent need to extricate itself from the widespread unionistic activities in which it is presently involved and to exercise the discipline necessary for regaining a unified and God-pleasing fellowship practice at every level.

The Book of Reports and Memorials to the 1983 convention of our synod contained the following report from our commission:

In April 1981 the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod issued a document entitled “The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship.” ...In June 1982 our CICR devoted a two-day meeting to a study and discussion of the Missouri Synod fellowship document. A formal evaluation of this document was thereupon approved by our CICR in September 1982, and this evaluation subsequently appeared in the winter 1983 issue of our seminary’s *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. As may be noted in our evaluation, our CICR found itself in agreement with many parts of the Missouri Synod document. We did, however, find it necessary to include the following paragraph in our evaluation:

“...we regret that the CTCR in its recommendation to the Missouri Synod speaks only of an Ecclesiastical Declaration of Altar and Pulpit Fellowship. While other forms of fellowship are not excluded, *expressis verbis*, yet it is evident from the entire document that the limitation to altar and pulpit fellowship is intentional. The other major shortcoming in the CTCR document is the absence of any reference to ‘weak brethren’ and ‘persistent errorists,’ a scriptural distinction which is critical for any scripturally correct practice in the area of church fellowship. Such shortcomings in any consideration or study of church fellowship can easily lead to the untenable concept recommending degrees of fellowship based on levels of doctrinal agreement. This is particularly the case when a study on church fellowship is restricted to church-body-level relationships while leaving unanswered what the implications might be on the congregational, pastoral, and individual level.”

In May 1983 the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod issued a report entitled *Theses on Justification*. Our commission carefully studied the CTCR report in the light of Holy Scripture and issued a thorough *Review and Analysis*. The document concludes with these words:

...let it be said that the CICR is extremely well pleased with the [LC-MS] document. The weaknesses noted in our analysis do not involve the substance of the doctrine but merely the manner of presentation.

The doctrine of objective justification was the watchword, so to speak, of the Synodical Conference. It was a principal subject of discussion in the organizing convention of the Conference in 1872. It is heartening to discover that on this vital doctrine we and our former brethren in the LC-MS speak with one voice. It is to be hoped that this strong and clear statement will enable them to come to grips with the error that has reared its head in their midst on this doctrine.

As has been noted in the *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, “The matter of inter-church relations...is the real issue separating the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods” (Vol. 45, Numbers 1–2, January-April 1981, p. 88). It is our fervent hope and prayer that the LC-MS trumpet will someday soon again give as clear and certain a sound on the doctrine of fellowship as it has given on the doctrine of justification.

The *Proceedings* of the 1985 convention of our synod include the following report by our commission:

In December 1984 a brief meeting was held at our Synod’s administration building involving representatives from The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod and our Synod. As indicated by President Mischke, the purpose of the meeting was to review the

situation as it presently pertains to the three synods, specifically, what it is that prevents a return to fellowship among the three synods. Participating in the meeting were three representatives from each synod, including the presidents of the three synods. Two members of our Commission were likewise in attendance at the meeting.

As reported to our Commission, the meeting was concluded with the understanding that each synod's delegation would go back to its respective doctrinal commission to discuss the possibility of meeting together again for the purpose of discussing doctrinal issues, e.g., fellowship, and that the presidents would relay to one another the recommendations of their respective commissions. In response thereto our Commission has expressed a willingness to meet with Missouri Synod representatives if such a meeting is set up for the purpose of discussing the scriptural principles of church fellowship.

That's where the situation stands today. We suspended fellowship relations with LC-MS on the basis of the scriptural doctrine of confessional fellowship. The scripturally untenable position of the LC-MS on the doctrine of confessional fellowship drove us apart in 1961. Since that position has not essentially changed, it continues to keep us apart today.

This is not to say that there are not other issues which divide us, and which would certainly have to be settled before any reestablishment of fellowship could take place. We have reference, for example, to the issue of woman suffrage, which the LC-MS has officially adopted. The doctrine of church and ministry would need to be addressed, especially since some in Missouri are again contending loudly for the old Missouri position that the local congregation is *specifically* instituted by God in contrast to other groupings of believers in Jesus' name; that the public ministry of the keys has been given exclusively to the local congregations, and that the pastorate of the local congregation (*Pfarramt*) as a specific form of the public ministry is specifically instituted by the Lord in contrast to other forms of the public ministry. We would have difficulty with President Ralph Bohlmann's visit to the pope and his accepting a rosary from the pope. Bohlmann's statement to our men who met with him in Milwaukee that he does not feel uncomfortable praying with people of the ALC or LCA demonstrates that the gulf between our synods is today at least as wide, if not wider, than it was when our fellowship relations came to an end 25 years ago.