A Tale of Two Synods: Lessons from the Dissolution of the Synodical Conference

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G. K. Chesterton, in The Wisdom of Father Brown, wrote that journalism “largely consists in saying, ‘Lord Jones Dead’ to people who never knew Lord Jones was alive.” That certainly describes the feeling I have had about writing and presenting my doctoral dissertation study of the Wisconsin Synod’s decision to break fellowship with The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in 1961, and the subsequent decision of the WELS to exit the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, hastening its demise in 1967.

Few pastors in the WELS ministerium are old enough to retain any personal memories of a shared fellowship with Missouri; if they do, their memories are more likely centered on the painful steps that led to the synods’ separation. One must have attained threescore years and ten, and then some, to recall the days when Missouri and Wisconsin Synod pastors met at mixed conferences, socialized with one another, preached for each other’s festivals, and accepted calls interchangeably. “As I remember, we got along well,” recalled one pastor, now in his eighties. “They looked and talked like good Christian men” who loved good cigars and good humor. “In those days the Missouri Synod stood for something.”

The Missouri Synod still stands for something today. By almost any other reckoning, Missouri remains rightly regarded as one of the most conservative church bodies in America, lumped (sometimes in a complimentary way) with Protestant Fundamentalists. Missouri’s recent rejection of the Lutheran–Catholic joint statement on justification in 1999 serves as but one example.

Only those even farther to the right—the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the Church of the Lutheran Confession, and the WELS—would label the LCMS a liberal church body. By several methods of reckoning the Missouri Synod is less liberal than it was in 1961, though additional issues divide Missouri from Wisconsin today, some of which appear more deeply entrenched.

This year’s seniors at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary will comprise the 15th graduation class that had not yet been born when Wisconsin severed fellowship with Missouri in 1961. Unlike graduates of previous generations, these seminarians probably know few if any LCMS pastors, students, or church members. Other than the predictably cranky reports out of Christian News each week (typically divulging Missouri’s least attractive traits spun in the unkindest possible way) WELS students and pastors may know little and care less what goes on today in their former sister synod. The lament of previous generations over the loss of “cherished relationships” was anguished and heartfelt; comparisons to how the Civil War divided families were not farfetched. But how can a current generation lament the loss of something it has never known?

Missouri’s changes are obvious. Though LCMS leaders insisted into the early 1960s that their synod was not changing, later observers confirmed the accuracy of Wisconsin’s accusations. A Missouri official in 1964 opined that the synod had “not dealt openly and honestly” with its pastors and people by refusing to “state our changing theological position in open, honest, forthright, simple, and clear words.” In 1973 another Missouri pastor charged that while leaders “kept telling people there were no changes” in the synod, “any village idiot anywhere in the church knew there were many.” Missouri’s changes since 1961, and more specifically since the 1974 walkout at Concordia Seminary, are also obvious (though less remarked upon by Wisconsin).

By contrast, Prof. Joh. P. Meyer insisted in 1962 that “we of the Wisconsin Synod are the ones who are preserving the position and spirit of the Synodical Conference,” a view echoed by other WELS editorialists. That position is demonstrably correct when one considers the factors that led to Wisconsin’s exit from the conference: Missouri’s continued participation in the military chaplaincy; its acceptance of the Scouting movement; its changed

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stance on prayer fellowship and prayer witness; and the apparent erosion in its insistence on the inerrancy of Scripture.

A more important question for us is whether the WELS has changed since 1961. Obviously, the Wisconsin Synod has grown larger, become more confident, and established a clearer synodical identity, but its doctrinal position has stayed the same. But even if the content of its teachings has stayed fixed, have there been changes in tone, balance, and personality over the past four decades?

The Three Ironies of Scouting

It is all but impossible to imagine the apprehension and antagonism created in the middle of the previous century by issues such as Scouting and the chaplaincy. One observer remarked that the “hot and sometimes bitter ‘amalgamation’ struggle” of the 1990s “does not approach that [of the] late ’50s and early ’60s for paranoia.”

One wonders whether any issue today could create the odium Scouting did in 1950. The explosiveness of Wisconsin’s anti-Scouting position is best illustrated by the events that occurred in Princeton, Wisconsin. Early that year the local newspaper The Princeton Times–Republican published several articles praising Scouting as “an American institution” in which “boys of all races and all creeds play and learn together.” Now more than ever, the paper editorialized, it was “necessary to avoid all religious and racial discrimination” so that all Americans grow to become fine citizens who observe “that great Democratic ideal that all men are brothers.” While Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy began delivering furious speeches exposing presumed communist sympathizers, and while The Milwaukee Sentinel asked why any American would refuse to take a loyalty oath denouncing the communist party, joining the Scouts was viewed as an obvious statement of patriotism and true American citizenship.

Late in 1949 a new but experienced pastor accepted the call to the Wisconsin Synod congregation Princeton and immediately sought to root out support for Scouting in his church. Upon discovering that the congregation’s president was also leader of a local Scout troop, the pastor demanded his president’s resignation from the Scouts. Rumors about this “hard-line pastor” swirled about town all spring until the week before Memorial Day, when the editor of the Times–Republican blasted the Wisconsin Synod for its anti-Scout stand. Insisting one must “either uphold scouting and the American way of life” or “go back to the narrow teachings of the church,” the editor charged that the synod “could hardly have done a more damaging act if they had boycotted the Congress of the United States.”

Confusing to the editor was the fact that Wisconsin’s position not only violated good citizenship but won scant endorsement from other churches. Scouting was tolerated and supported by mainline Christian denominations, in Jewish synagogues, and even among Mormons in Utah—not to mention its endorsement by other, larger Lutheran bodies. “Only in the eyes of some 192,000 Wisconsin Synod Lutherans is scouting boycotted. Can so many be wrong and so few be right?”

Within a week the Times–Republican editorial was reprinted in newspapers around the United States, prompting an outpouring of outraged response. Anyone, wrote one correspondent, who thought the Boy Scout oath represented false doctrine “does not belong in this country.” Since clergymen receive special protection and their churches are treated favorably by the government, “they should be among the first to support Americanism.”

For almost half a century the Wisconsin Synod had struggled to convince the neighbors that its members were loyal American citizens. After making a successful transition from German to English in its parishes and after sending thousands of its young men as soldiers into two world wars to fight against Germans, it was ironic and hurtful to be labeled “anti-American” for its opposition to Scouting. Professor Edmund Reim admitted that it was “no light matter” for synod members to find themselves being denounced as “un-American,” all for insisting on the right of free judgment and refusing to bow to misinformed public censure.

A second irony arose from the fact that for more than thirty years big sister Missouri had also opposed Scouting. Some of the most powerful and widely-read position statements against Scouting came out of Concordia Publishing House, authored by Missouri Professor Theodore Graebner. Scouting ignored mankind’s sinfulness and the need for repentance as essential ingredients to genuine moral development. Scouting’s “daily Good Turn” led easily to “pharisaical work-righteousness.” Graebner accused Scouting of creating a false image of God and religion by placing all religions on an equal plane. The Scout
The Wisconsin Synod had been sounding restrained but determined opposition to Missouri on several issues for almost a decade, but Missouri’s stunning reversal on Scouting now provoked a public response from Wisconsin. In a rambling, emotional editorial in June 1945, *Northwestern Lutheran* editor William Schaefer said he was “shocked beyond measure” and “sick at heart” to read of the high number of Scout troops and Cub packs in Missouri, and still “more than shocked” that Missouri would publish such news at the very time Wisconsin and other Synodical Conference bodies were taking strong issue with Missouri on Scouting. Accusing Missouri leaders of “flaunting” the announcement in the face of its own sister synods, Schaefer asked, “Is it an attempt to violate and force the consciences of these men [in the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods] and to create disruptions?” Schaefer found it impossible to imagine that the “rugged leadership of the godly and valiant men of a few decades ago” in Missouri would have let such a thing to occur.

The sad irony was that the Wisconsin Synod now found itself in conflict with the very body that was formerly its ally. “Time was when there was agreement in our Synodical Conference on this matter,” Reim wrote. Individual disagreements among pastors or members of either synod were to be handled “by patient instruction and evangelical persuasion.” Different understandings were discussed privately, with frequent warnings against “the mechanical application of ‘rules’ and other legalistic measures.” Missouri’s change in policy and practice had the net effect of making a private practice public. “It is not a matter of Wisconsin against some poor little Scout,” Reim insisted, but of Wisconsin “standing for a certain principle of Christian education, holding out against a widely held modern opinion”—held, now, even in the Missouri Synod.

While continuing to present theological argument against Scouting, the Wisconsin Synod offered a practical substitute in the Lutheran Pioneer and Lutheran Girl Pioneer programs. Therein lies a third irony.

In an effort to remain separate from worldly intrusions and Calvinist innovations, the Wisconsin Synod opposed numerous movements and programs in the early decades of the century. Synod fathers took a dim view of the radio and considered questionable at best its utilization in proclaiming the gospel. Wisconsin rejected what it considered harebrained schemes to attract new members into the church or to

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oath was frivolous for “exacting of boys the common virtues of life which they should be expected to do as a matter of course.” Graebner saw numerous parallels between Scouting and lodges, once labeling the Boy Scouts “a preparatory school for Freemasonry.”

Though appreciating Missouri’s partnership in such an unpopular stand, the Wisconsin Synod arrived at its anti-Scouting position independent of Missouri. The *Northwestern Lutheran* in 1914 warned that Scouting constituted “a league where boys of all confessions and creeds are banded together on oath to ‘do their duty to God’—unionism in its worst form.” There is “a religious element in Boy Scoutism,” warned Pastor John Brenner, but it was not that of the Bible. The proposition that Scouting could be salvaged if placed under Lutheran Scoutmasters was dismissed by M. C. Schroeder in 1929 as “pure folly.” Regardless what an individual troop does, “it is a unit of the national organization, supporting it financially and morally,” and thus strengthening “the religiously false, indifferent, unionistic and humanistic stand of the organization as a whole.”

Yet the Missouri Synod did just that at its 1944 convention. Its Bureau of Information on Secret Societies reported that it was unable to find “any factors which would violate our principles” and it could not discover “anything in the practices of scouting, as outlined in [Scouting] handbooks to which a Christian parent, scoutmaster, or pastor would take exception.” Pastors and congregations were urged to exercise “sole and unrestricted right” to “control everything of a religious nature that is to be superimposed upon the official scout program.” Since the committee felt convinced that by appointing congregational scoutmasters, the objectionable features of scouting were removed, it recommended that the matter of scouting should be left to the individual congregation to decide.

Less than a year later the Missouri Synod announced that it had more than 220 Boy Scout troops and Cub Scout packs in its congregations—third highest total for any Lutheran church body in the United States. Either hundreds of Missouri congregations moved at lightning speed to organize congregational Scout and Cub groups, or—more likely—many Missouri congregations had been ignoring their synodical stance for a decade or more.
prevent young people from leaving it. Editorialists especially deplored the use of advertising to advance the church’s mission. Movies merited near blanket disapproval. Jazz music and the modern dance were condemned as snares of Satan.

Scouting proved to be the “worldly” amusement Wisconsin could not defeat, and so a synodically-approved version of Scouting was incorporated into church life. As it did so, Wisconsin unwittingly created a paradigm for confronting and overcoming other “worldly” attractions. Today, the “menace” of public secondary education has been replaced by a national network of Lutheran high schools and a Lutheran liberal arts college, maintaining Lutheran principles yet mimicking in many ways the very secular institutions they seek to replace. Christian contemporary music seeks to sound as much as possible like other popular songs on the radio, and the WELS Connection successfully imitates the polished news magazines of television. Wisconsin has developed WELS versions of 12-step programs, youth rallies, counseling services and, most recently, its own version of Promise Keepers for men.

In all these endeavors there is much to be commended—the visionary efforts of their initiators, increased doctrinal and practical instruction for synodical members, and fellowship opportunities separate from the world. Yet it is ironic that the synod’s first arguments against Scouting lay in its criticism of the “proliferation of groups” threatening to overrun the local congregation with Calvinistic busy-ness and usurping from Christian parents and the Christian home the obligation to be the chief teachers of their children. One can only wonder what Hans Moussa and John Brenner—chief authors of warnings against the “proliferation of groups” in the church—would say if they could see how the Wisconsin Synod has incorporated within the WELS dozens of the very sort of groups they considered harmful to the church.

The Private Lives of Lutherans

A key issue as the Missouri–Wisconsin debate intensified was the question, “Who changed?” Wisconsin conceded there was no virtue in maintaining a position “simply because it has acquired a halo of age and tradition” but was worth holding “only if it is right.” Wisconsin believed “the old doctrinal position of the Synodical Conference was right.” Nowhere was debate waged more fiercely than over prayer fellowship.

Both synods looked back on a prayer fellowship position explicated by Missouri’s Friederich Bente in 1905. Responding to criticism that Missouri pastors had refused to pray with members of other Lutheran synods in free conferences, Bente granted the existence of true children of God in all churches. He insisted that Missouri would “never deny all communion of faith and prayer” to those “who err from weakness or lack of insight” but would patiently support them. The Ohio and Iowa Synods, however, could not rightly be considered “weak brothers” because they persistently adhered to false doctrines regarding election, conversion, the Antichrist, Sunday, and other teachings. As long as they persisted in false doctrine despite Missouri admonition, Missouri’s “arm’s were tied” and the synod could not embrace Iowa and Ohio “as brothers.” Prayer fellowship with the “adversaries” in these synods would make them guilty of “lies and deceit, controversy and inconsequence,” and so there could “never be any talk of joint prayer services between us and them.”

Going a step further, Bente reasoned that if Synodical Conference representatives prayed with Ohioans and Iowans, the Conference “would have had to push on inexorably” to other expressions of church fellowship. “Those who say ‘A’ and join the Ohioans and Iowans together in prayer must also say ‘B’ and institute joint preaching and the Lord’s Supper.” Once a Christian grants the “deepest and most intimate fellowship” of joint prayer to other Christians, “he cannot deny them any other form of brotherly harmony.” Christians who express a common faith in one form of fellowship must inevitably include all other expressions of fellowship as well.

Thus, more than a half century before Wisconsin–Missouri tensions arose over prayer fellowship, Missouri formulated and championed two key points: (1) prayer fellowship was to be practiced with weaker Christians, even beyond denominational boundaries, if they were willing to accept instruction, but prayer fellowship was withheld when Christians persisted in unbiblical teaching or practice despite patient instruction; and (2) various expressions of church fellowship were not to be categorized or ranked in a hierarchical chain of significance, but all expressions of fellowship (exchange of pulpits, reception of Holy Communion, joint prayer) were various manifestations of a single fellowship.
By the mid 1930s, however, challenges to both key concepts began to appear in the Missouri Synod. Adolph Brux, Missouri missionary to India, prayed with Presbyterian mission workers in Beirut and Bombay, then charged that the synod was wrong to deny prayer fellowship to other Christians who differed with Missouri over “nonfundamental doctrines.” When Missouri Synod representatives began meeting with representatives of the American Lutheran Church (ALC) in the late 1930s, hoping to resolve lingering doctrinal disagreements, they now opened these meetings with joint prayer. Pressed for an explanation, Missouri drew a distinction between “joint prayer,” intended to express agreement in faith, and “prayer witness,” offered only as testimony in the presence of other Christians. Wisconsin (and many in Missouri, for this was fast precipitating a Missouri Synod civil war) regarded that as a distinction without a difference.

By 1949, Bente’s argumentation was considered a minority view among some Missouri leaders. The meaning of key Bible passages, formerly beyond dispute, was now being debated. Once unassailable pronouncements from Walther and other synodical fathers were now opened to reinterpretation. Missouri’s pre-1905 history was revisited. It seems impossible for any fair-minded observer to escape the conclusion that Missouri was changing.

Beginning in the late 1940s, Wisconsin was forced to delineate with greater precision what it had taught regarding prayer fellowship since at least the turn of the century.

There can be “no agreement in prayer among those who are disagreed as to their various religions,” wrote Pastor Henry Koch in The Northwestern Lutheran in 1948. “This also excludes prayer fellowship with other Christian denominations as well as among conservative and liberal Lutherans and Lutheran bodies.”

Joh. P. Meyer explained that prayer fellowship always “presupposes a common faith, believing in the same God and approaching him on the same premises,” and thus also “presupposes church fellowship, established by a common confession of a common faith.” Neither sin nor weakness of faith disrupts the unity of the church, but “a refusal to accept the testimony of the Church” does disturb that unity. Taking what seemed direct aim at Missouri inconsistencies, Meyer said there were some “who make a distinction between church fellowship as it appears in the form of pulpit and altar fellowship, on the one hand, and prayer fellowship on the other.” Jesus, however, “does not make such a distinction.”

Edmund Reim concurred, saying we must “continue to speak of one fellowship” which “manifests itself in many ways.” Prayer, altar, and pulpit fellowship “are not so many different fellowships, but outstanding ways in which this one great fellowship manifests itself.” Fellowship “is all of one piece, like the seamless robe of Christ.” Great havoc will result “when this great unit of the truth concerning the fellowship of believers is divided and subdivided into countless fractions,” with each “treated as an isolated subject, for separate treatment and consideration.”

By 1954 the Wisconsin Synod’s fellowship teaching came largely to assume the wording employed today. “With Church Fellowship we mean every outward expression and demonstration of Christian fellowship,” including prayer, wrote Carl Lawrenz. “We stand before [God] not merely as individuals but as believers who are intimately joined together with all other believers here on earth and in heaven above.” Thus “all our prayers are joint prayers.” In whatever ways believers may act in giving expression to their common faith, “they do not become so many kinds of fellowship” but are “all expressions of one and the same fellowship of faith.”

Wisconsin came to call this the unit concept of fellowship. Already in 1950 Wisconsin’s members on the Synodical Conference Committee on Intersynodical Relations expressed their conviction that the term “church fellowship” was employed in Scripture “as a unit thought.” By 1960, differences between the synods on this point had crystallized. “Should church fellowship be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith?” Wisconsin answered Yes, Missouri No. At that an impasse was declared, and the vote to separate soon followed.

Important to note, however, is that the context of these statements was always the public gatherings of Lutheran bodies or their representatives for prayer, worship, or joint ministry endeavors. That was certainly the context Bente addressed in 1905, and it was at least implied in the statements both synods made in the 1940s and 1950s, when Missouri defended its practice of joint public prayer and Wisconsin opposed it. Wisconsin rejected a 1946
ALC pronouncement favoring “selective fellowship,” which Wisconsin defined as the practice of individual pastors and congregations of one synod sharing pulpit or altar fellowship with pastors and congregations of another synod across synodical lines “where the respective synods themselves cannot do it or sanction it.” There also Wisconsin objected to the public practice of pastors and congregations.

Wisconsin almost never addressed the private lives of Lutherans. If two individual Lutherans, members of synods not in fellowship, had a private interaction, were they always obligated to act in harmony with the pronouncements of their respective church bodies? One might expect Wisconsin’s answer to be an unequivocal Yes, yet Wisconsin writers were cautious about insisting on that. One church body can declare that its official doctrinal statements disagree with those of another church body, but individual church members are often weak believers. They may not fully know or understand the doctrinal positions of their synod. They may question the accuracy of their church body’s pronouncements. They may be seeking the truth and willing to accept instruction.

Although he rejected even “an occasional joint prayer” between disagreeing synods, Meyer nonetheless conceded that he was assuming “ordinary circumstances.” He allowed for exceptional cases where “the separation of a different confession has fallen” because “there are just you and the dying person before the face of God.” In such circumstances a person may not only “send a prayer up to God for him” but also “ask him to join you in a prayer.” Praying together under such circumstances would not constitute unionism, Meyer explained, because “God Himself removed all thought of confessional differences by the accident which brought you and the dying man face to face.”

Wisconsin went still farther, removing such hypothetical “death bed” considerations, in Prayer Fellowship, Tract Number 10 of 11 tracts published to present Wisconsin’s side of the disputed intersynodical issues. While hewing the synodical line, Prayer Fellowship voiced loving concern for Christians beyond its denominational boundaries:

We know that there are devout children of God in all synods who unfortunately are not yet informed regarding the matters in controversy and are not aware of their involvement in error through membership in a heterodox synod. I may have an ALC grandmother who has always manifested a simple, childlike faith in her Lord and Savior, but who nevertheless is unaware of the intersynodical differences and their implications. When I visit her in the privacy of her home, it might be a grave mistake were I to assert the principle of refusing to pray with her under such circumstances. What would the Lord have me do? Should I trouble her simple faith in these matters which are apparently beyond her grasp? Or is it not my plain duty to support her and build up her faith by praying with her and otherwise expressing my own faith.

We dare not forget that there are those Christians who may be caught in an error, not willingly, but because their understanding of Scripture is insufficient. They are willing to bow to Scripture, but as yet, through human weakness, do not see clearly how the truth of Scripture necessarily rules out their error. What does God say to us concerning such weak Christians? He tells us: “Him that is weak in the faith, receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations” (Rom. 14:1). Receive, He says, receive such a weak brother and tenderly help him overcome his weakness. ‘Receiving’ such a weak Christian means that praying with him may well be in place and Godpleasing, and we trust that God will help him to grow in knowledge and strength.

By using the example of an ALC grandmother, the author of Prayer Fellowship went well beyond saying that fellowship could still be practiced among those with whom Wisconsin used to be in fellowship. Wisconsin was never in fellowship with the ALC, and of the ALC’s three constituent bodies—the Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo Synods—Wisconsin had been in fellowship only briefly with Ohio, never with Iowa or Buffalo.

Carl Lawrenz echoed this concern for weaker Christians in 1954. While in principle we express church fellowship only with those who “embrace the entire Word of God,” in reality every Christian’s faith is “plagued by weakness.” Such weakness of faith “is not in itself a barrier for Christian fellowship” but instead “an inducement for exercising our fellowship for the purpose of helping our brethren overcome their weakness.”
The wording of Wisconsin’s 1959 statement concerning weak believers, repeated in the WELS *Doctrinal Statements* of 1970, was in fact made more forceful: “Weakness of faith is not in itself a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an encouragement for practicing church fellowship *more vigorously* to help one another overcome our weaknesses of faith. *In precept and example Scripture abounds with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak.*”\(^{65}\)

Many Christians in our own and other church bodies are weak believers. “The faith of Christians and its manifestations are marked by many imperfections, either in the grasp and understanding of Scriptural truths, or in the matter of turning these truths to full account in their lives.”\(^{66}\) In our private relationships, we should not withdraw the practice of prayer fellowship *even from Christians of other denominations* simply because of these weaknesses in understanding and belief. In fact—significantly, I believe—the WELS fellowship statement never mentions denominational membership. The theses present a logical progression of thought from the *Una Sancta* composed of all believers in Christ, to the outward expressions of faith, to the outward confession of faith, to weakness of faith and persistence in error.\(^{67}\)

It is only after Christians demonstrate that “in spite of patient admonition” they “persistently adhere to an error in doctrine or practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it”\(^{68}\) that we are compelled to withdraw our expressions of church fellowship from them. St. Paul was “not thinking of anyone who might casually make an erroneous doctrinal statement, but only those who *cling to their error and with it create divisions.*” We must separate from those who “habitually” adhere to false doctrine. Scripture does not require us to stay away from every person outside of our church body simply because he or she believes differently than we do.\(^{69}\) The theses emphasize that we can select individuals or groups for joint expression of faith “only on the basis of their confession” and that “it would be presumptuous on our part to attempt to recognize Christians on the basis of the personal faith of their hearts.”\(^{70}\) Yet the theses *nowhere state that denominational membership be regarded as the only or even the primary confession for us to consider.*

At Wisconsin’s pivotal 1961 convention, some delegates requested clarification of the synod’s fellowship statement; others openly challenged it. One pastor asked, “How can we ever pray with others if every prayer is church fellowship?” Lawrenz replied that joint prayer was ruled out “only with persistent errorists.”\(^{71}\)

Following the 1961 convention, the Protes’tant journal *Faith–Life* criticized Wisconsin’s action of breaking with Missouri, arguing that when “the married children of a family who have joined the Missouri Synod because of proximity return home to the table of their parents, who belong to the Wisconsin Synod, they must now by [Wisconsin’s] decree refrain from having prayer fellowship with their own parents, who led them into the faith.”\(^{72}\) Though not responding directly to *Faith–Life*, Wisconsin Professor Armin Schuetze demonstrated that *Faith–Life* had overstated and misrepresented Wisconsin’s position. While acknowledging the importance of church membership as an act of confession—“To disregard this public confession would only create offense and confusion”—and while agreeing that members of a persistently erring church body “are to be avoided in all joint *public* expressions of faith”—Schuetze asked, “What about *private* personal relationships to others? . . .

*Such a person from an erring church body is with you in your home, or you are in his home. From your private contact with him you know that he confesses trust in Christ as his Savior from sin, that he confesses himself to the Scriptures [sic]. It is apparent that his membership in the false church body is the result of a still weak faith which does not fully understand the seriousness of the errors, or it is clear that he actually does not share the errors at all. In this case you have more to go by than the confession of his church membership; there is also his personal confession before you. And since now in your personal relationship to him public offense and confusion is not involved, you may well ask yourself: Is this perhaps one of those of whom the Word of God tells you: “Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations” (Rom. 14:1). Is this a smoking flax that you are not to quench? Thus in your private relations where public offense is not involved, you may on the basis of a man’s confession recognize him as a brother in Christ with whom you may then also join in prayer, and that includes table prayer.*
Early in 1962, answering a charge from Missourians critical of Wisconsin’s position, Pastor James Schaefer, Wisconsin Synod Director of Public Relations, wrote that there are “many gradations between persistent errorists and Christians whose faith is weak or uninformed, or even misinformed.” Some, Schaefer granted, may by their confession reveal themselves as persistent errorists, “but there are many other Christians who confess their Lord and Savior whom we cannot so identify. In these instances, each situation must be considered by itself.”

Admirable as that statement is, the “weak members” throughout that paragraph are limited to the membership of the Wisconsin Synod. Nowhere does the author say or suggest that we may regard anyone outside the WELS as weak brothers or sisters. The focus has shifted entirely to people within our church body.

Another difference is how 2 John 9–11 is now being employed to limit the number of weak Christians that may even exist outside of our synod. “Those who work together with false teachers,” says a 1997 Northwestern Lutheran presentation, “either by giving them financial support or by wishing them well, are enemies of the truth, who are guilty of sharing in the false teachers’ sin.” Offering financial support to any false teacher makes people “accomplices of an evil act, just as much as the individual who drives the getaway car for a bank robber or who hides a fleeing murderer.”

Understood in that way, any Christian who has supported any ministry other than that of the WELS or the ELS has aligned himself with a persistently erring ministry. Therefore, weak brothers and sisters can exist only in the WELS or the ELS. The Doctrinal Statements of 1970 cite 2 John 9–11 in reference to our exercise of church fellowship with persistent errorists; today the passage is being used to designate virtually all other church members as persistent errorists.

One must also ask whether WELS fellowship presentations today maintain the same tone and balance that they did four decades ago. “In the
matter of the outward expression of Christian fellowship,” the 1959 theses said, “particularly two Christian principles need to direct us, the great debt of love which the Lord would have us pay to the weak brother, and His clear injunction (also flowing out of love) to avoid those who adhere to false doctrine and practice.” Today, with the definition of “weak brother” already more limited, a 172-page discussion of church fellowship principles, history, and practice devotes only four paragraphs to weak brothers. After those four paragraphs come three pages that discuss doctrinal discipline at the congregational, district, and synodical level; the assumption throughout is that these are WELS members who have become persistent errorists. There is no discussion of the private recognition of weak brothers who may exist in other denominations. Instead, one finds only this blanket statement: “If [individuals] disagree in doctrine, they should not practice church fellowship with each other.”

Beyond the WELS, the past four decades have seen a decline in religious knowledge and denominational loyalty. “The will to believe is alive” according to the 1999 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, but religious institutions no longer influence people’s lives as they did 30 years ago. Not as many people “have kept up an attachment to the denominational bodies that serve to organize and guide religious life throughout much of this century.” Many members have received weaker doctrinal instruction and exhibit a lower level of religious knowledge than they did in the 1950s and 1960s. That would suggest that there may be more weak brothers and sisters in other denominations today. They may be willing to receive biblical instruction. They may not have hardened in their disagreement to become persistent errorists.

Is It Really About the Fellowship Principle?

The most debated passage of the Wisconsin–Missouri debates was Romans 16:17–18. In the King James Version in which it was then regularly discussed, the passage reads: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.”

The traditional understanding and usage of the passage, at least since the beginning of the century in both synods, was that it prohibited any expression of church fellowship unless based on complete agreement in doctrine. The doctrine referred to all of Scripture’s teaching; distinctions between fundamental and nonfundamental doctrines were invalid. The verb form used for those who cause divisions and offences suggested a repeated, habitual practice rather than an occasional mistake in word or action. (Saying, for example, “I went downtown last Tuesday,” implies a single occurrence, but saying, “I go downtown on Tuesdays,” implies habitual, even premeditated action.) The passage warned against those whose repeated action caused divisions and placed obstacles in the path of believers. These divisions and offences were contrary to the doctrine—hence, the uniquely WELS term “persistent errorist.”

Remarkable was how the shape of the debate changed as different portions of the passage were employed to address shifting disagreements. The first challenge to the traditional understanding of the passage came from Adolph Brux, who questioned the meaning of the phrase contrary to the doctrine ye have learned. Brux found it indefensible and uncharitable to apply the stern warning in the passage to confessing Christians who sincerely disagreed on doctrines not central to the Christian message. The application of the passage to “every and any minute deviation on the part of erring Christians” was, in Brux’s view, “not warranted by the context” of the passage but actually “in violation of it.”

Although a Missouri Synod review committee repudiated Brux’s study and appeals to Missouri’s 1935 and 1938 conventions proved unsuccessful, Missouri’s changing fellowship doctrine as presented in its 1960 “Theology of Fellowship” was in fact an acceptance of the Brux position. Missouri resolved at its 1965 convention that “The Theology of Fellowship,” with slight revisions, be adopted as its official statement of policy and practice. That subsequently occurred in 1967.

Two challenges to the traditional understanding of Romans 16:17 arose in the 1950s. The first involved the phrase who cause divisions and offences. Traditionally this phrase was understood as an adjectival phrase, modifying the noun doctrine. Thus the passage censured those who were causing divisions and offences by changing the doctrine they had been taught; Wisconsin and conservative
Missourians applied the phrase to Missourians who modified synodical teachings and practices regarding Scouts, the military chaplaincy, and, by the 1950s, church fellowship itself. Some charged that the phrase should be understood as an adverbial phrase, suggesting that the passage instead censured “those who, contrary to the teaching you have learned, are creating divisions and offenses.” Thus not the teachings but “the actions of these men [were] in direct contradiction to the teaching” the Roman Christians had learned.”85 “Moderate” Missourians appealed to this interpretation as convenient cause for accusing conservative Missourians and Wisconsinites that they were the ones violating the passage by acting in a negative, contentious manner.

The second challenge in the 1950s—far more devastating within the Wisconsin Synod—occurred over the commands to mark and avoid. By 1953 there was growing insistence in some quarters of the synod—both geographical and ideological—that Wisconsin break from Missouri soon. At Wisconsin’s 1955 convention at Saginaw the synod’s Standing Committee on Church Union, a permanent commission composed of seminary professors and district presidents, recommended that Wisconsin terminate fellowship with the Missouri Synod. The convention’s Floor Committee on Church Union, composed of selected pastors, teachers, and lay delegates, concurred with the Standing Committee’s judgment that Missouri had “created divisions and offenses by its official resolutions, policies, and practices.” Yet the Floor Committee also felt constrained to offer a majority resolution that action on severing fellowship with Missouri be delayed until a recessed convention in 1956. To many, it appeared that Wisconsin was separating the two commands of the passage: it marked Missouri as an erring church body, but by postponing final action on severing fellowship it failed to obey the command to avoid Missouri.

A special Wisconsin convention in 1956, noting what appeared to be hopeful signs in the Missouri Synod during the previous year, held its action “in abeyance” for yet another year. At Wisconsin’s 1957 convention in New Ulm—in reverse of 1955—the Standing Committee wanted negotiations with Missouri to continue but the Floor Committee recommended a split. The convention’s vote to break with Missouri failed by sixteen votes.

At this, many Wisconsin Synod pastors, particularly in western Wisconsin, Minnesota, and the Dakota—Montana District, could no longer in good conscience remain in the Wisconsin Synod. To mark Missouri as a persistently erring church body while failing to avoid constituted for them a clear act of disobedience to a scriptural command. Where, asked one proponent of this view, does God’s Word ever give us the right to disobey now because of the possibility of change in the future? Pastors with similar concerns found one another and, in 1960, founded the Church of the Lutheran Confession.

All three of these challenges in the understanding of Romans 16:17–18 still arise. Today, however, disagreement seems to center around the word avoid. To what degree, and under what circumstances, are we to avoid?

When the Wisconsin Synod defined church fellowship as “every joint activity, manifestation, and demonstration which Christians on the basis of their confession of faith find themselves to be in agreement,” the very wording of the statement implied that there will be—in fact, must be—contacts between WELS members and other Christians that were never meant to be considered “joint activities, manifestations or demonstrations” of a common faith.86 They may be mere incidental contacts, as when Christians of differing confessions meet in a public forum. They may be occasions when Christians of differing confessions unite around a shared concern, though it is not in itself an expression of their faith nor does it imply common belief.

Explanations in the 1940s regarding “cooperation in externals” leave a reader confused because they seem to grant the existence of “externals” while at the same time all but ruling them out. In 1947, for example, Edmund Reim insisted “without a moment’s hesitation” that there were “externals in which a Christian may without offense cooperate” with those not united in a common confession of faith. “We do not claim that Synodical Conference Lutherans may have no contact with Lutherans of other bodies,” Reim wrote,87 though he and others offered the sensible warning that actions labeled “external” may prove to be more of a “spiritual nature than advertised.”88

Yet in the very next breath it was questioned whether any work in the church—or work of any kind performed by Christians—could be understood as being “external.”89 All church work ultimately constitutes an “expression of a life, a new life, a life created by the special act of the Holy Ghost.” Could
charities, orphanages and other missions of mercy ever be considered “merely secular agencies for the physical relief of suffering”? Appeal was made to the apostles in Jerusalem who “evidently” did not view their work of caring for widows and the needy as “secular” work. Organized joint work in ministries of mercy “is a form in which Christians practice their love as a fruit of the spirit” and which “definitely” constituted “a phase of their sanctification.”

Given this interpretation, a conscientious WELS reader would conclude that since everything a Christian does is a fruit of faith, he was forbidden from doing just about anything together with anybody except other WELS members. By logical extension, “every joint activity, manifestation, and demonstration” of faith can be expanded to include virtually every activity and demonstration of his entire life, even if such activities were undertaken with no intention of being an expression of fellowship. Understanding is further blurred when the objection is raised, “No matter what you intended by your actions, I understood them to be an expression of church fellowship.” Even where it is not given, offense is taken.

Thus the fellowship principle is sometimes stretched to condemn actions that go well beyond church fellowship. Admittedly, some examples come as rumor and anecdote, perhaps exaggerations of the truth. One hopes they are false rumors. It is insisted that all bridesmaids and groomsmen in a wedding must be WELS, or that all pallbearers at a funeral must be WELS, because they are “participating in the worship service.” A pastor who consents to having his picture taken with clergymen of other denominations is considered guilty of “unionism.” Objections are registered because WELS and LCMS senior citizen volunteers at a Bethesda Lutheran Homes thrift shop are allowed to work together unpacking boxes of donated clothing. Pursuing graduate study at non-WELS colleges and universities, even in “non-theological” areas, receives forceful discouragement. Engaging non-WELS educational consultants is considered a violation of fellowship. “Ordinary social relationships” with any other than WELS Christians are advised against because they may give offense.

In the hottest moments of the Missouri–Wisconsin debates, some synodical interpreters anticipated such overspreading of the fellowship principles. In 1956, Northwestern College President E. E. Kowalke warned against “resorting to quick legalistic actions” to settle practical difficulties liable to arise.

This may sound silly, but in the event of a separation, we may expect such questions as: May I hire a Missourian to work for me? May I invite a Missourian to dinner? May a Wisconsin pastor stop and talk with a Missouri pastor on the street? Should we let our children play with the Missouri neighbor’s children? May our colleges and schools employ Missouri Synod janitors? Should our high schools and colleges schedule basketball games with Missouri Synod schools? Questions like that are going to be asked, because some of them have already been asked. How are they and a hundred more like them, some of them much harder questions, going to be answered? We must not think that if our controversy with Missouri is settled that our troubles will be ended. There is no such thing in church life or any other form of life as the end of troubles, and we don’t look for such a fool’s paradise here on earth.

Five years later, on the eve of the synod’s decision, Pastor E. H. Wendland feared that Wisconsin’s acceptance of the unit concept, with its emphasis on every expression of faith, would curtail useful activities in which synod members were already engaging with members of other denominations.

What do we mean by “furthering the cause of the Gospel” as one of the expressions of faith included in our unit concept of fellowship? Distributing God’s Word is certainly furthering the cause of the Gospel. This would mean that our congregation could no longer contribute to the work of the American Bible Society, since this work is also supported by those not in confessional agreement with us. Any joint expression of faith in the matter of “Christian education” is an activity to be included under church fellowship. One would hardly feel free, then, in joining with people of heterodox church bodies in linguistic studies, editing and publishing works of Luther, or participating jointly in any undertaking involving the gifts God has given us for the furtherance of His work. If some of these applications sound rather forced and legalistic, it is not because we feel that they should be included under
the concept of church fellowship. We feel, however, that our Commission’s definition of the term as it stands and as it proceeds from “every” expression of man’s faith activity forces this conclusion upon us.

Such sweeping appeals to the unit concept would inevitably result in “legalistic misunderstandings and misapplications which we do not wish to be responsible for.”

Asked in a 1997 survey how the Wisconsin Synod had changed since 1961, one WELS pastor, grateful for the synod’s numerical and theological growth, remarked that Wisconsin’s break from Missouri “has contributed to a spirit of parochialism.” Elaborating, this respondent recalled Jesus’ injunction that his disciples were to be “in the world but not of it,” which the respondent took to mean that “we are to insulate ourselves from the world without isolating ourselves from it.” Parochialism “tends to substitute isolation for insulation, or at least to confuse the two.” He feared that some WELS pastors today regard clergy from other denominations with suspicion, figuring “it’s better to be safe,” and so “we aren’t even cordial [to them], as though cordiality would compromise our confessionalism.”

Another way parochialism manifests itself, he wrote, is in the practical way we recognize the church.

We all confess to believe in the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, but we have a problem translating that belief into any kind of positive action—as though maybe there aren’t any real saints outside the WELS. In applying fellowship principles we want to be sure to be on the safe side. We overreact. In doing so we exhibit behavior that in part gives credence to the stereotype people have of us. We live and work in an ecclesiastical ghetto, and act as though we think that is one of our strengths.

Do the previously mentioned allegations actually violate scriptural passages on fellowship and the 1959 WELS “Statement on fellowship”? Or do they demonstrate our discomfort at stepping outside the busy, all-encompassing “WELS-world” we have created of congregation, school, social activities, familiar customs, and extended family and friendship networks? Rather than risk the censure of our ministerial “brothers,” it may be safer and simpler for us to avoid any such contacts with other Christians entirely, even though they offer us opportunities to encourage others in their faith, testify to the truth, and—most controversial—even learn something useful from them.

It seems the Wisconsin Synod has faced such concerns before. As we now have ready access to English translations of the distinctive essays of “Wauwatosa Theologians” August Pieper and J. P. Koehler, it is instructive to reread Koehler’s critique of the Wisconsin Synod in 1914. Arguing that “there is not a single truly united external religious communion, synod or individual congregation” (and, in fact, there has never really been an external unity of the church), Koehler warned that legalism “infiltrates among us in the form of bragging about orthodoxy” in which “the stress is shifted from faith to correct faith.” Such a “bravado of orthodoxy feeds on the factious spirit which opposes the ecumenical spirit.”

So, what happens, or what may happen, when one meets another Christian?

I find joy in the fact that someone else believes in the Lord Jesus, no matter in which fellowship I meet him. . . . I can do nothing else than acknowledge him and also in that way my Savior and, as there is opportunity, foster this partnership in salvation in the truth. When I meet anywhere someone who believes in the Lord Jesus, then what interests me above all else is that he so believes, and that through faith he is a child of God and a member of the body of Jesus. I will express as much in emphasizing the things that unite us in faith and not, by finding fault and criticizing, mainly emphasize the things that separate us.

If it is true that the doctrine of church fellowship is “the special identifying mark of the WELS” and that “we should not be embarrassed to have our synod’s name associated” with that doctrine, I hope that a review of the history of the debate between the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods will lead us to think some more about how we balance concern for the truth with love for the church, and especially for the many souls who live beyond our denominational boundaries but are eager to hear the truth.


See Armin Schuette, “The WELS and the LCMS—Where Are We Now?” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 85 (Fall 1988): 261–84.

In a brief item entitled “About today’s WELS college freshmen,” an unnamed editor, noting that 18-year-olds in 1999 “have never been without MTV” and assume that postage stamps “have always cost 32 about cents,” added that “they have never heard of the Synodical Conference.” *The Northwestern Lutheran* 86 (June 1999): 33.


In a 1955 letter, President John Behnken expressed his “honest conviction that the Missouri Synod has not changed its doctrinal position” during its efforts to establish doctrinal unity with the American Lutheran Church.” John W. Behnken to “Taffy” (W. F. Klinwith), 19 August 1955, in CHI, Behnken papers, Suppl. 1, Box 15, Folder 9; cited by Thomas A. Kuster, “The Fellowship Dispute in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: A Rhetorical Study of Ecumenical Change” (Ph. D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1969), 268.


17 Walter Stroschein had nineteen years of experience in the pastoral ministry when he accepted the call to Princeton in November 1949. “St. John’s of Princeton Observes Stroschein’s Fiftieth,” *The Northwestern Lutheran* 67 (9 September 1980): 368.


28 *Missouri Synod Proceedings*, 1944. 102.


46 *Missouri Synod Proceedings, 1944*, 251–52.


48 Most notorious was the *Statement of the 44*, in which a select group of Missouri theologians “deplored[d] the fact that Romans 16:17 and 18 has been applied to all Christians who differ from us” in minor doctrinal points. “A Statement,” *The American Lutheran* 28 (November 1945): 4.


43 Edward Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: A History of the Single Synod, Federation, and Merger* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), 280, rightly noted that Bente’s comments constituted an argument for the unit concept of church fellowship “even if that term is not used.”


45 Wisconsin President John Brenner protested to the Synodical Conference “numerous instances of an anticipation of a union not yet existing, or as it has been put, not yet declared.” *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1945*, 74. For examples, see O[lto] A. Geisemann, “While It Is Day: Lutheran Union and Intersynodical Conferences,” *The American Lutheran* 24 (November 1941): 5. J. F. E. Nickelsburg, “Concrete


65 *Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Milwaukee: WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations, reprint 1970), 33; emphasis added.

66 *Doctrinal Statements*, 32.


68 *Doctrinal Statements*, 42.

69 *Doctrinal Statements*, 44; emphasis added.

70 *Doctrinal Statements*, 52.

71 This report comes from notes written and transcribed in an unpublished paper, “Report and Reaction (Wisconsin Synod convention 1961), 1. Prange cited the substance of each speaker’s statements in quotation marks, although speakers may not have used the exact words in every case, and some statements were summaries of their remarks.


73 Armin Schuetze, “May We Pray At Table With People Not of the Wisconsin Synod?” *The Northwestern Lutheran* 48 (22 October 1961): 342, 350; emphasis added.


75 *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS* (Milwaukee: Commission on Inter-Church Relations of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1997).


77 Gawrisch, “Romans 16:17, 18,” 267; emphases added.


80 *Doctrinal Statements*, 29, 42, 45–46.


82 The 1999 *Yearbook* is quoted in *The Northwestern Lutheran* 86 (June 1999): 33. For other discussions of the decline of denominational loyalty and religious knowledge, see Lyle E. Schaller, *It’s a Different World!* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 25–28, 73–
83 Adolph A. Brux, Christian Prayer-Fellowship and Unionism: An Investigation Of Our Synodical Position With Respect To Prayer-Fellowship With Christians Of Other Denominations (Racine, Wis., 1935), 5, 7, 10–11.


86 The 1970 Doctrinal Statements say that Christian fellowship does not include “social contact or any of the other ordinary contacts of life” (44). Actions such as offering a greeting, shaking hands, extending hospitality or providing physical help “are in themselves not of necessity expressions of Christian faith.” Doing such things together with others “does not necessarily make them joint expressions of Christian faith” unless “those involved intend them to be that, understand them in this way, and want them to be understood this” (52).


89 Schaefer, “Siftings,” 104.

