

The Battle for the Gospel in the Lutheran Churches in the United States

As I write these words, I have just returned from church. It is Trinity Sunday and we have together confessed our faith in the words of the Athanasian Creed. In this marvelous creed we confess the undivided unity of the holy Trinity. The mystery expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity is one which we are able to put into words but cannot fully comprehend. The fellowship of the persons within the Trinity is also very difficult for us, as finite human beings, to grasp.

Jesus speaks of this fellowship on more than one occasion. In John chapter 8 Jesus speaks of the relationship between the Son and the Father. The Pharisees become more and more angry as Jesus describes this relationship. Their fury grows as Jesus makes clear that this relationship is between Himself and the Father, thus drawing into the conversation the doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God. The fellowship between the Father and the Son is experienced by the man Jesus. Jesus' lecture culminates with the declaration, "Before Abraham was, I AM." (John 8:58) The Jews, rightly understanding Jesus' declaration to be one with the Father and to be the very God of Israel, become outraged and pick up stones to stone him for blasphemy.

Later in the Gospel of John, in his high-priestly prayer Jesus speaks again of his fellowship with the Father and prays that a comparable fellowship might exist with and between those who believe in Him. Having prayed for His disciples, He continues praying and says, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in me, and I in you; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave me, I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one." (John 17:20-22)

How God honors His children! He gives them a fellowship, a unity comparable to that between the persons of the Trinity. But Jesus makes it clear in this same prayer that this fellowship, this unity is not one created by men. It is given by God. And Jesus also makes it clear in this same prayer that this fellowship, this unity is not given by God randomly. No it is a unity and fellowship based upon the truth of God's Word. Jesus prays, "I have manifested your name to the men you have given me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your Word." (John 17:6) Jesus prays, "I have given them the words that You have given me, and they have received them." (John 17:8) Jesus prays, "I have given them Your word and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world." (John 17:14) Jesus prays, "Sanctify them by Your truth; Your word is truth." (John 17:17)

Jesus prays, “For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth.” (John 17:19)

The fellowship which we have as Christians is not based on a sense of solidarity between like-minded people. It is not based on a human decision to associate with people of similar ideas. It is based belief in the truth, specifically the truth of God’s Word. For that reason, historically, in the Christian Church, Christians have declared fellowship with each other when it has become clear that they are in agreement with each other under the truth of God’s Word. They have broken fellowship when it has become clear that they are no longer in agreement under the truth of God’s Word.

The *Augsburg Confession* declares, “It is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian Church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the Sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word.” (AC VII) The *Formula of Concord* expands on this concept: “We believe, teach and confess that no church should condemn another because it has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God, as long as there is mutual agreement in doctrine and in all its articles as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments.” (Ep. X, 7)

Our Lutheran Confessions describe the way in which Lutherans have historically considered the matter of church fellowship. Fellowship is established and declared always on the basis of the truth of God’s Word. This approach to fellowship has always been a hallmark of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Perhaps a little history of religion in the United States will assist in demonstrating why the matter of church fellowship has been so important in the life of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in particular and American Christianity in general.

It is generally believed that many immigrants to the United States in its early history went to the US in order to experience freedom of religion. This is true; they went in order that they might have religious freedom, but not necessarily in order that others might have it. Thus, before the US Constitution was adopted and before the Revolutionary War, “six of the thirteen states had some type of established church. Eleven of the thirteen states had a religious test for holding office.”ⁱ For example, most required a belief in the deity of Jesus.

Thus, the founders of the United States were overwhelmingly Christian in their confession, but were not by any means all members of the same church body. When the delegates came together in the convention that led to the writing of the Constitution, all of the delegates, other than Benjamin Franklin, who was a deist, belonged to a Christian denomination. “Thirty were Episcopalian/Anglican; 16 were Presbyterian; and eight were Congregationalist. There were three Quakers, two Catholics, two Methodists, two Lutherans and two Dutch Reformed – and one self-professed deist.”ⁱⁱ Many of the states limited the holding of office to Protestant

Christians. Others allowed Trinitarian Christians to hold office. Religious freedom, as we know it today was not universally enjoyed in the original colonies.

When the US Constitution was adopted by the States, it contained no mention of a state religion, although it did prohibit a religious test for holding office. This prohibition is the only mention of religion in the Constitution. Not long after the adoption of the Constitution by the 13 states, it became apparent that to ensure the freedom of its citizens envisioned by the Founders, other rights and prohibitions needed to be stipulated. A Bill of Rights was written containing a number of Amendments, the first of which forbade the establishment of a state religion and provided for the free exercise of religion. But this amendment bound the federal government, not the governments of the states. Many of the original thirteen states still had a state religion, such as Quaker for Pennsylvania or Anglican for Massachusetts. Only New York and Virginia had no religious test required of those who wished to hold office in government. Some of the states that entered the Union later, such as Tennessee and Texas, did have religious tests. Eventually, of course, all of the states removed their religious requirements for citizens to enjoy full religious freedom. But in the beginning it was not so.

At the time of the nation's founding, the three major churches were the Anglican, Congregational and Quaker. But then came a time of a so called religious revival called *The Great Awakening* and by the turn of the century, the religious landscape had shifted. Now the largest churches were the Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian.

Thirty eight years later those who were to form the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod began to arrive. They were Saxons declaring religious persecution and seeking a home where they could worship freely. They were Prussians persecuted for resistance to the Prussian Union of Friedrich Wilhelm II. They were Franconians (Bavarians) looking for opportunity and desiring to do mission work among native Americans. What was the religious climate they encountered when they arrived?

In the early and mid 1800's the United States had experienced what can only be described as a theologically and ecclesiastically stormy time. During the *Second Great Awakening* many of the more traditional church bodies had experienced great numeric losses to a wave of new cults and sects and movements. Having cast off the shackles of British monarchical rule, an independent spirit filled with the exhilaration of democratic freedom, had led many to embrace religious movements and figures which called into question and redefined the traditional theology and practice of American denominations. The nature of the Church, Church polity, the relationship between clergy and laity, the proper methods for mission work, the form of worship, the liturgy, ecclesiastical authority, all areas of the church's life which formerly had been stable, were called into question. It is probably not too strong to say that this nation

underwent a second revolution, a revolution defining or formulating the shape which much of American Christianity and religious life would take from that time onward. Nor was this revolutionary spirit confined to the practice of the church. Little, if anything, was exempt from the scrutiny of an approach which was inclined to look with suspicion upon established authority of any kind. According to Notre Dame professor Nathan Hatch, “This stringent populist challenge to the religious establishment included violent anticlericalism, a flaunting of conventional religious deportment, a disdain for the wrangling of theologians, an assault on tradition, and an assertion that common people were more sensitive than elites to the way of the divine.”ⁱⁱⁱ The common people were challenged “to take religious destiny into their own hands, to think for themselves, to oppose centralized authority and the elevation of the clergy as a separate order.... to trust their own religious impulses.”^{iv} Consider how contemporary the following description of American religious life in the 1800’s sounds to our ears today. (At least this is true for us who live in the United States.)

The splintering of American Protestantism compounded the sense of rootlessness and fragmentation, particularly for devout Christians. The first third of the nineteenth century experienced a period of religious ferment, chaos, and originality unmatched in American history. Few traditional claims to religious authority could weather such a relentless beating. There were competing claims of old denominations and a host of new ones. Wandering prophets appeared dramatically, and supremely heterodox religious movements gained followings. People veered from one church to another.... The flexibility and innovation of religious organizations made it possible for an American to find an amenable group no matter what his or her preference in belief, practice, or institutional structure. Churches ranged from egalitarian to autocratic and included all degrees of organizational complexity.... One could opt for traditional piety or join a perfectionist sect. Religious options in the early republic seemed unlimited; One could worship on Saturday, practice foot washing, ordain women, advocate pacifism, prohibit alcohol, or toy with spiritualism, phrenology, or health reform.^v

This was the time of phenomenal growth among the Methodists at the expense of the mainline Protestant denominations, particularly the Presbyterians; this was the time of camp meetings and revivals; this was the time of growth and consolidation for the American born cults. Joseph Smith’s *Book of Mormon* appeared in 1830; by 1847, the very year the Missouri Synod was founded, the Mormons had arrived in Utah where they would settle. Seventh Day Adventism can trace its beginnings to the preaching of William Miller around 1831. Ellen White’s *Christian Science* appeared on the religious horizon a few decades later around 1870. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, founded by Charles Taze Russell came into being about 4 years later. It was an extremely turbulent time in the history of American religious life. It was a time, Nathan Hatch indicates, when religious “...dissenters confounded the establishment with an approach to

theological matters that was nothing short of guerrilla warfare.”^{vi} And it was during this time that the early members of the Missouri Synod arrived on American soil and founded our church.

The task which lay before them of establishing a confessional Lutheran church body, especially in view of the circumstances described, was a monumental one. The fact that such a church body was in fact formed can be attributed, in my opinion only to the work and the grace of God. Consider for example the events which took place in Missouri, in St. Louis and Perry County, shortly after the Saxons arrived. On May 5, 1839 in St. Louis one of the pastors, Pastor Loeber, preached what was described as a particularly powerful sermon. On that same day two women came to him, each at a different time, without a knowledge of the other’s coming, to confess that they had been guilty of sexual immorality with their bishop, Pastor Martin Stephan, the one who had led them from Saxony to their new home.

Can we even imagine how great the disillusionment must have been following this revelation? The emigration had been harrowing enough, involving the sale of their homes, departure from friends and loved ones in Saxony, the criticism and ridicule which resulted from their decision to leave. Then came the voyage which took 43 to 62 days depending on the ship – accompanied by sickness, a number of deaths and even the loss of one of the five ships, the *Amalia*, which was never heard from again. In New Orleans before the trip by river up to St. Louis some of the members of the *Gesellschaft* (the Society which immigrated) defected from the company. Then following their arrival in St. Louis, mismanagement of funds by Stephan became apparent as well as extravagant expenditures by him, housing difficulties in St. Louis, the search for affordable land coupled with dwindling funds, the dearth of available housing in the land which they did purchase. All these difficulties served to demoralize and discourage. And then to top it all off, they discovered the infidelity of their pastor. A young pastor named C.F.W. Walther was dispatched from St. Louis to Perry County to deal with the situation with the result that Martin Stephan was banished from their community and told never to return.

Perhaps this whole series of events was a wonderful blessing clothed in the form of what the people then surely saw as a great tragedy. For what happened as a result of Stephan’s deposal was that the episcopal polity which he imposed on the church already on the ship during their voyage to America was set aside and this small Saxon community was forced, so to speak, to deal with the same questions regarding their Lutheran identity and the validity of their church, questions that dealt primarily with the doctrine of church and ministry. These poor people were asking themselves whether they could be a church at all since they no longer had a bishop. And did they have the right to call their own pastors? The great physical suffering which they then experienced seemed, in the minds of many of them, to underscore the futility of everything they had done in leaving their homes in Saxony and coming to the United States of America.

This uncertainty joined with the chaotic religious scene in American religion made the situation ripe for failure. Walter Forster, in his book, *Zion on the Mississippi*, through a series of questions, provides excellent insight into what must have been the mental state of the Saxons at this time.

Everyone had now been so completely unnerved by the tempest that literally no one knew where he stood. Had the pastors the right to serve congregations? Had they been justified in leaving their congregations in Germany? Or ought they return? Had the entire emigration been justifiable? Had their idolization of Stephan deprived them of the claim to being Christians? Were they a church or a mob? Were they the Lutheran Church or a Stephanistic association? Had they the right, if they were congregations, to call pastors and teachers? Had they the right to depose those now in office? If they had this right, were they obliged to do so? What of the tarnished record of these men? More fundamentally: What was a church? What was the office of the ministry?.... These and a thousand other questions agitated the minds of the people, who were beset by economic difficulties, remorse of conscience and shame before the public.^{vii}

It would not have been surprising at all had the whole venture fallen completely apart, its members drifting slowly one by one to the various denominations surrounding them in their new home. But this did not happen. God had other plans. When the Saxons arrived in Perry County, "The older synodical [Lutheran] bodies of the East reflected the religious and social practices of other American Protestants of the time. The practice of revivalism and protracted meetings was carried over from earlier years and intensified."^{viii} The "New Measures" typical of the holiness groups and the Methodists had been adopted to a great extent by the Lutherans in the east. The temptation and the opportunity were certainly present among the Saxons to imitate the practice of the already established American Lutheran denominations.

But, as indicated before, it may well have been a blessing in disguise when, because of Stephan's deposal, the early Saxons were required to deal not with the question, "How can we be Lutherans in America?", but, "How can we be members of an orthodox Lutheran congregation at all?" Forced to deal with questions such as, "What is the Church?" and "How does the Church provide herself with pastors?", their attention became focused on theological rather than cultural questions. C. F. W. Walther in the very first thesis of his presentation in the Altenburg debate with the layman Marbach, who was contending that there really was no church among the Saxons, reaffirmed the orthodox Lutheran view of the nature of the Church:

The true Church, in the most real and most perfect sense, is the totality (Gesamtheit) of all true believers, who from the beginning to the end of the world from among all peoples and tongues have been called and sanctified by the Holy Spirit through the Word. And since God alone knows these true believers (2 Tim. 2:19), the Church is also called invisible. No one belongs to

this true Church who is not spiritually united with Christ, for it is the spiritual body of Jesus Christ.^{ix}

Walther's second thesis expands upon the foundation laid by the first.

Thesis 2: The name of the true church belongs also to all those visible companies of men among whom God's Word is purely taught and the holy sacraments are administered according to the institution of Christ. True, in this church there are godless men, hypocrites, and heretics, but they are not true members of it, nor do they constitute the church.^x

Of course, these are only two of many theses presented and merely a brief indicator of the nature and extent of the debate which took place between Walther and Marbach but it can safely be said that the Altenburg Debate set the tone for the direction which the Missouri Synod would take. The doctrine which they embraced then is that to which we still cling today.

Thus, as I indicated earlier, it was a blessing in disguise when the founders of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod were led to define their identity, not according to the American religious culture or setting. They could have chosen between the Lutheranism of the General Synod, which was more liberal and that of the General Council which was more conservative. Instead, perhaps due somewhat to language barriers, they almost ignored the history of American Lutheranism entirely and focused instead on the writings of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions to determine what it meant to be Lutheran.

Since that time the Missouri Synod has been committed to a theology that is based on Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions which are a faithful exposition of the Scriptures. But our history has not been uneventful and without challenge. In the 1960's and 1970's the Missouri Synod went through an extremely difficult and dangerous time. The Historical Critical Method that had made great inroads into most of the mainline Protestant churches in America, including the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America, had also invaded the Missouri Synod and was having a great impact at our St. Louis seminary.

I cannot take the time today to give a lengthy explanation of the Historical Critical Method. Suffice it to say that it was a rationalistic approach to the Bible that subjected it to human reason as it would any other book. The Bible was no longer seen as the revelation of God but as the religious views of men subject to error and to the incorrect world views of their own time. Thus, the duty of the biblical critic was to separate the true from the mythical.

Some of the professors at the St. Louis seminary claimed that they used the Historical Critical Method with Lutheran presuppositions, but Kurt Marquart demonstrated ably that such use was not possible:

...the historical-critical method arose out of the rationalistic Enlightenment and differs from traditional biblical scholarship in that it insists on treating the Bible not as an unquestioned authority, but as one ancient book among others. All biblical statements are therefore open to challenge before the court of sovereign human reason.... This means that the critic and his reason are judge and jury, while the Bible, like all other ancient documents, is on trial whether as defendant or as witness; for even as a witness its credibility depends entirely on the findings of the critical court. This situation, of course, represents a complete reversal of the classic roles of reason and Scripture in Lutheran theology. Under the new, critical regime, reason is master and Scripture is servant, whereas formerly it was the other way round. For this reason alone, ... “using the historical-critical method with Lutheran presuppositions is as futile and absurd an undertaking as eating ham with Jewish presuppositions.”^{xi}

Many of the professors at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, had swallowed the Historical Critical Method “hook, line and sinker” and the result was a denial, especially by some of the teachers in the exegetical department, of certain biblical teachings and many biblical events. As the knowledge of this unbiblical teaching began to be known in the church, many pastors and laypeople became alarmed and a true war developed in the Missouri Synod focusing on the authority of Scripture. In the early 1970’s the “battle for the Bible” was raging and the Missouri Synod President at that time, Dr. J. A. O. Preus, my uncle, appointed an investigative team to report on what was being taught at our St. Louis seminary.

In September of 1972 the results of that investigation were published in the form of a report to the church entitled, *The Report of the Synodical President to the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*,^{xii} popularly called *The Blue Book*. A cursory reading of *The Blue Book*, which was 160 8½ by 11 inch single spaced pages, will reveal that the overwhelming focus of attention was upon the doctrine of Scripture. *The Blue Book* was a bombshell not just for those whose views it condemned, but for the entire complacent crowd of Missouri Synod members who had refused to believe that there were any problems at the St. Louis seminary. The issue at the heart of the entire controversy was to what extent Scripture could be considered and accepted as the Word of God. And it all centered around the historical-critical method and whether or not it could be properly used by Lutheran theologians.

Although many of the professors insisted the historical-critical method could be used with Lutheran presuppositions, leading to results in accord with Lutheran doctrine, the members of the Missouri Synod, in general, were shocked at the results to which it had led. Let me provide a brief description of various positions held and taught and/or tolerated. (In my text I indicate the *Blue Book* page on which the particular teaching appears.)

1. A redefinition of the term “verbal inspiration.” p. 32

2. A rejection or redefinition of the inerrancy of Scripture. p. 42
3. Gospel reductionism. p. 45
4. Misunderstanding of the Gospel. p. 52
5. Approval by the majority and use by many seminary professors of the historical-critical method.
6. Isaiah 53 is not messianic. p. 81
7. Theistic evolution including that of *homo sapiens*. P. 94
8. Historic events and biblical teachings are frequently minimized or set aside. The following narratives and teachings become uncertain as to their historical facticity:
 - A. The existence of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. p. 67
 - B. The cursing of the fig tree by Jesus. p. 68
 - C. The existence of Adam and Eve. pp. 71, 92, 93
 - D. A worldwide flood. p. 72
 - E. Jesus walking on the water. pp. 72-73, 75
 - F. The raising of Lazarus from the dead. pp. 73-74
 - G. The virgin birth of Jesus. p. 74, 98 ff.
 - H. Peter walking on the water. p. 75
 - I. The coin in the fish's mouth. p. 75
 - J. Sayings of Jesus attributed to Him by the Gospels. p. 77
 - K. The existence of angels, both good and evil. p. 85
 - L. The fall into sin. Original sin. pp. 92, 93, 95

Much of the theological approach resulting in the above-mentioned positions seems to be the result of a view expressed rather starkly by one of the professors whose comments were included in the Blue Book. "Faith does not depend on the facts, the documentation, the buttressing, the historical accuracy of what you are building your faith on."^{xiii} Well, of course all Christians believe that faith is in a person – Jesus Christ, not in isolated facts per se, however, the apparent willingness to see faith as valid even when apart from facts and history, as we understand it, is not consistent with orthodox Christianity.

In 1973, some months following the release of the Blue Book, The Missouri Synod, meeting in convention in New Orleans, adopted resolution 3-09, quoting from the *Formula of Concord* concluded that many of the views then held by seminary professors are, "Not to be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended."^{xiv} I imagine Resolution 3-09 may well be the most important resolution ever to be passed by a Missouri Synod convention. In my

opinion it truly was a watershed resolution. It indicated the course which Missouri would follow in dealing with the faculty majority at the seminary. By passing *Resolution 3-09*, the members of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod gave notice that God's people would not put up with the false doctrine of its seminary's professors.

Not too long after this synodical convention, in January of 1974, the St. Louis seminary president, Dr. John Tietjen, was suspended from office by the seminary board of control for teaching false doctrine and for permitting false doctrine to be taught at the seminary. In response to his suspension, events went forward rather quickly. The student body majority declared a moratorium on attending classes; the faculty majority informed the Board of Control that they would not teach until Dr. Tietjen was reinstated. The Board of Control issued an ultimatum to the faculty majority informing them that if they did not return to class by a certain date, they would be dismissed. They did not return to class and they were dismissed. These events tied to the suspension of John Tietjen became known as the "Walkout." 45 professors and over 500 students walked out. Eventually, they established what they called a "Seminary in Exile" or "Seminex" and most of the students who walked out attended this new seminary.

In addition, many congregations supported those who walked out and within a few years a new church body was formed with the name, Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). The Missouri Synod lost over 250,000 members to this new church body but the exodus effectively ended the battle over the Bible in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Then on January 1, 1988 the AELC joined with the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America to create the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA).

Prior to this merger the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America had already gone far beyond the faculty majority at the St. Louis seminary in embracing the Historical Critical Method and its conclusions. And although there were certainly faithful Lutherans in both these church bodies, there was no general uprising or organized opposition to the new teachings being introduced into those churches.

In 1969 the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod had declared altar and pulpit fellowship with the American Lutheran Church. After many years of discussions, the majority believed that we did actually have a doctrinal agreement that would allow for this declaration. But already by 1979, only 10 years later, the Missouri Synod in convention moved to dissolve that fellowship in view of the direction over against Scripture that the ALC was pursuing. The most obvious action taken by the ALC to indicate its departure from historical Lutheranism was its decision to ordain women to the pastoral office.

Today, as we look at Lutheranism within the United States, it appears that the two largest Lutheran church bodies are drifting farther and farther apart. Permit me to summarize some of the major differences and then to make some observations.

The first major difference is our approach to Scripture. I will not go into this difference in detail since I have been focusing on this topic already quite a bit. Let me just state briefly that the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is committed to the inerrancy of Scripture. The ELCA is not. As a result, its professors are permitted to teach that the Bible has errors and there is hardly a biblical teaching that is not contested in ELCA seminaries.

The second major difference is our approach to the Lutheran Confessions, the *Book of Concord*. The Missouri Synod accepts the Lutheran Confessions with what we call a *quia* subscription. The Latin word *quia* means “because.” We accept the Lutheran Confessions because they are a faithful exposition of the Scriptures. Article II of our Constitution puts it this way: “The Synod, and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation:... All the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God.”^{xv} The ELCA accepts the Lutheran Confessions with a *quatenus* subscription. *Quatenus* is the Latin word for “insofar as.” They accept the Lutheran Confessions insofar as they agree with Scripture. Their Constitution has a relatively weak endorsement of our Lutheran Confessions but in actuality, the Lutheran Confessions play only a minor role in their public life and proclamation. And, I would point out, a subscription “insofar as” is hardly a subscription at all. I can, after all, subscribe to the Book of Mormon insofar as it agrees with Scripture.

A third major difference between us would involve the entire approach to church fellowship. In the Missouri Synod church fellowship is declared with other church bodies when it has been determined that we are in doctrinal agreement on all the chief articles of the faith. This is no longer the case in the ELCA.

There is no question as to what church fellowship meant to the early church. “Participation in the Holy Communion in every case completes the reception into the church fellowship. No church fellowship, no altar fellowship. The only exception is the deathbed.”^{xvi} Thus states Werner Elert, clearly an acknowledged authority on the practice of the Lord's Supper in the early church. Church fellowship in the early Christian church, according to Elert, is always also communion fellowship. Elert makes it very clear that in the position and in the practice of the early church, altar and pulpit belong together. Heretics were absolutely excluded from the sacrament in orthodox congregations as were members of heterodox congregations.

In contrast, in recent years the ELCA has decided, in convention, to establish and declare pulpit and altar fellowship with the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, the Moravian Church and the United Methodist

Church. These decisions not only demonstrate that the ELCA has forfeited its desire to remain Lutheran. They also suggest that the ELCA is no longer operating with the same understanding of the concept of truth that has guided Lutheran Churches since the time of the Reformation. It certainly demonstrates that the ELCA no longer holds to the historic practice of church fellowship that has been characteristic of the Lutheran Church since the time of the Reformation.

Consider the Reformed view of the Lord's Supper. The Reformed deny the Real Presence of Jesus' body and blood in the Sacrament. They deny also that the Sacrament bestows the forgiveness of sins. Why do they attend the Lord's Supper? Simply because the Lord has said, "This do in remembrance of me." They come in obedience to His command. They view the Lord's Supper simply as "a memorial meal in commemoration of the death of Christ." In other words, they view the sacrament as law rather than Gospel. Regardless of the piety with which their "memorial meal" is celebrated, it remains true that if one regards the Sacrament primarily as something pious Christians do in obedience to Jesus, one sees the sacrament as law. In their teaching on the Lord's Supper, the Reformed have deprived the Church of everything which our Lord Jesus placed into His precious Testament – His body and blood, and what they bring – grace, absolution, forgiveness, life and salvation. They have bequeathed to the Church instead the hollow shell of pious human obedience – this because they see the Sacrament as law, not as Gospel.

Their theft of our inheritance in the Lord's Supper is clearly a result of their denial of the Real Presence. Luther asks in his *Small Catechism*, "What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?" And you know his answer well. "That is shown us by these words, 'Given and shed for you for the remission of sins'; namely that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation." How can Jesus give us His body and His blood without giving us that which His body and blood purchased for us? Thus, when we participate in the Lord's Supper, we participate in the death and resurrection of Christ and everything which His death and resurrection achieved for us is given to us.

Can such a confession be made in celebrating the Lord's Supper by those who deny the real presence? If the real presence of Jesus' body and blood in the Lord's Supper is denied, all of the benefits which the Lord's Supper brings to us are denied us as well. If the real presence is denied, the Lord's Supper ceases to be a celebration of the salvation which God gives to His Church and becomes simply a corporate act of obedience. The Lord's Supper is then no longer a distinctively **Christian** sacrament - because the Church of Christ lives not by works, but by grace. The doctrine of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament truly unites the body of Christ, the church, in a common confession of faith in the grace of God as it

comes to us in the body and blood of the Savior. A denial of this doctrine reduces the sacrament to an act of obedience which could be performed by any pagan without any understanding of grace or of a God who forgives.

Is the Sacrament of the Altar law or Gospel? For those who do not even agree on the answer to this question common participation in the Sacrament is inconceivable. The very foundation of Christianity, the doctrine of justification is involved. For Lutherans to permit Reformed to Lutheran altars is to show contempt (whether knowingly or not) for the doctrine of justification by grace, for such "Lutherans" are saying, are they not, that Sinai and Calvary are essentially the same. At least, they are saying, it makes no difference whether one sees participation in the Lord's Supper as an act of obedience to the law or as a believing reception of the grace of God and participation in the atoning death of Jesus. To take such a position is an incredible effrontery to Christ whose last will and testament the Lord's Supper is. Doesn't one through such an action say, "Lord Jesus, it makes little difference to us what the meaning of Your testament is. Law and Gospel, Sinai and Calvary are not far apart when we come together at this altar."

Finally, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are divided over the office of the holy ministry, namely, who may hold that office. As I indicated earlier, the American Lutheran Church had embraced women's ordination back in the mid 70's. The Lutheran Church in America had adopted it before that. The merger in 1988 brought together three church bodies, all of which supported the practice of ordaining women into the holy ministry. This alone would make fellowship between the LCMS and the ELCA impossible. In Missouri we take the position that to ordain women is to disobey our Lord who has made it clear in His Word, the Holy Scriptures, that only males may hold this office. But in recent years the ELCA has gone even further and has approved the ordination of homosexuals into the office of the ministry. This practice permits unrepentant and open sinners to hold the office and is open mockery of our Lord's will for us. The ELCA's commitment to this reprehensible behavior is made clear by the recent election of Rev. R. Guy Erwin as bishop of the Southwest California Synod of the ELCA. His election took place on May 31 of this year. According to Emily Eastwood, executive director of "Reconciling Works," an arm of the ELCA that has been promoting the ordination of homosexuals for many years, "One of our own has been chosen not in spite of being gay, but because he is truly gifted and skilled for the office. Once again, today we are proud to be Lutherans."^{xvii}

As I said earlier, the two largest Lutheran church bodies in the United States are drifting farther and farther apart. How wide is the gap? We differ on the doctrine of the ministry – Who may hold the office? Who may be called to the public proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments? We differ regarding who ought to be receiving the

sacrament at Lutheran altars. We differ on whether or not it is contrary to the Gospel to permit the teaching of evolution, a teaching which clearly impinges on the doctrine of original sin. We differ on whether or not it is permissible for professors who deny the deity of Jesus or the resurrection of Jesus or the Trinity to remain in good standing in our church body.

But there is another area in which we disagree which, in my view, will separate us permanently unless it can be resolved. If it is resolved, the ELCA may correct its aberrations in these other areas; if it is not resolved, the ELCA will only continue further along the same bleak road which has been traveled by the rest of liberal Protestantism in America. We differ on the means of grace. Yes, we do. Although the ELCA may give lip service to the Word and Sacraments and say that they believe God speaks to us only through the means of grace, their view of the Word, their view of Scripture belies that confession. It seems to be the almost universal position of professors and the position of most pastors within the ELCA that the Bible contains errors. The very word "inerrant" is treated with derision. But if the Scriptures contain errors, one can say all he wishes about the Word of God as the means of grace – where is one to **find** that Word? Who will condescend to reveal to us where God speaks in Scripture and where man speaks? We all know that when one has taken this position concerning the Word, ultimately one can go anywhere he wishes. Our confidence in the Word, our assurance in the Gospel, our hope for heaven, our certainty of salvation, our confidence in the sacraments – all must be undermined.

When a church body has taken the path which has been taken by the ELCA in regard to God's Word, it is not at all surprising to see some among them proposing intercommunion with Roman Catholics, nor is it particularly surprising to see that they have decided to share the Lord's Supper with Reformed churches which hold to a belief about the Sacrament which is totally contrary to our own. After all, can we really be certain of our own position anyway? Who knows what is true and what is not? Shouldn't we rather unite in a determined, yet uncertain, movement toward who knows what future?

I have focused primarily in my presentation on the two largest Lutheran church bodies in the United States. The Missouri Synod has about 2.5 million members; the ELCA has about 5 million. There are also some smaller Lutheran church bodies. These tend to be more conservative in their doctrine and practice. The Wisconsin Synod has about 400,000 members. The Evangelical Lutheran Synod, which used to be called the Little Norwegian Synod, has about 25,000 members. Then there are some others that are smaller still.

I want to make clear that I do not believe that the Missouri Synod is a church body without problems or that we are a perfect church. We face very difficult challenges. One is that church discipline does not always take place as it should. Another more serious problem involves the worship life of our church. Many congregations have begun to use what is commonly called

“contemporary worship.” And although we do not wish to be a legalistic church body telling congregations what they may and may not do when it comes to worship, it simply is true that this matter is dividing our churches from each other. When I was a child, one could travel anywhere in the United States and visit a Missouri Synod congregation and without difficulty join in the worship. Today, one can visit Missouri Synod churches and be unable to discern from the worship that they are even Lutheran. This is because most of what is called “contemporary worship” has lost its distinctively Lutheran character. Frequently, the focus shifts from the Second Article of the creed to the First Article and the emphasis in the service is no longer on God giving his people the forgiveness and salvation they so desperately need, but instead our praise of God and our service to Him.

The issues that divide the major Lutheran church bodies in the United States do not just involve minor matters. They actually revolve around our understanding of the Gospel. This is not surprising because Satan’s attacks on the church are always meant to attack faith and faith lives from the Gospel. Attacks on Scripture and its reliability cause doubt about its ability to bring us a message about God that we can trust. Thus faith is undermined. A communion policy that permits all to come even those who deny that in the Sacrament of the Altar forgiveness is given, is clearly an attack on the Gospel since it deprives the communicant of the grace by which He lives before God. The ordination of homosexuals is an assault on God’s law and the consequence is an antinomian spirit that recognizes no need for grace and forgiveness and the Gospel is lost. Worship which loses its christocentric focus also loses its ability to lead people to the only One who can help them.

Before I close, I would like to make clear that although Lutheranism in the United States faces great difficulties and challenges, there are also wonderful opportunities for a church like the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod with a biblical, truly Lutheran, theology. Because of decisions made by the more liberal Lutheran churches around the world, many churches are beginning to look more closely at the Missouri Synod as a possible church partner, precisely because of her more conservative, traditionally Lutheran theology. For example, early this year the largest Lutheran church in Africa, the Mekane Yesus church of Ethiopia severed church fellowship with the Church of Sweden and with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Although these churches have had strong historic ties with each other for many years, Mekane Yesus could not live with the decisions of these churches to ordain homosexuals into the ministry of Word and Sacrament. It was very significant that leaders of Mekane Yesus invited officials of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to be present during the church convention at which they severed their relationships with the ELCA and the Church of Sweden. Since that day, Mekane Yesus has asked the Missouri Synod to assist them in the training of pastors at their seminaries and we have arranged to send a missionary to Ethiopia for that very purpose. The leaders of Mekane

Yesus believe that they will be training 10,000 pastors for ministry during the next ten years and they want the theology these men are taught to be historic Lutheran theology. Rev. Carl Rockrohr, an LCMS missionary, arrived in Addis Ababa just a few weeks ago to help our fellow Lutherans in Ethiopia to prepare for the future needs of their church in the theological formation of their pastors.

The Lutheran church in Tanzania and in Madagascar have also shown an interest recently in a closer relationship with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod – for the same reasons Mekane Yesus had. Together these three churches represent at least 13 million of the estimated 19 million Lutherans in Africa. So the possibility for a more confessional Lutheran church growing in many places in Africa looks much more promising than it did just a few years ago.

Our church leaders are also conducting theological discussions with a Lutheran church in Indonesia and another Lutheran church in Andhra Pradesh, India. In my opinion both of those discussions will eventually lead to declarations of church fellowship between our church bodies. We have also had discussions with the leaders of the Mission Province in Sweden and Finland and hope for positive results from those conversations.

I should not conclude without mentioning the work that I have been involved in for the last eight years. Until one year ago, I was serving as the Executive Director of the Luther Academy in the United States. Our major work has become the exporting of our Lutheran theology to churches and pastors overseas. From 2005 until now we have been holding theological conferences in various world areas. We send teachers to instruct Lutheran pastors, that is men who have already been ordained. Because in many cases, in 3rd world countries, the pastors' theological education has not been as thorough as they need, we offer Lutheran instruction on many topics to assist pastors in seven world regions to develop a stronger Lutheran doctrinal stand and then to share it with the other pastors in their country. We are presently conducting these conferences in South America, Central America, West Africa, East Africa, Togo, India and Indonesia. Everywhere we go, the pastors are extremely grateful for the teaching they receive and beg us to continue what we have started. And this we do. The conferences range from about 30 participants in Ghana, to 90 in Indonesia to 400 in India. The Holy Spirit works through the proclamation of God's Word and it is very exciting to see pastors so eager to learn good biblical theology and then to take it to the members of their churches. I have retired as the Executive Director of the Luther Academy but I continue to work with them to promote this work of teaching Lutheran doctrine in many countries.

So while the number of Lutherans in all the Lutheran churches is shrinking each year in the United States, we see wonderful opportunities globally for the rejuvenation of Confessional Lutheranism, a Lutheranism faithful to the Bible and to our historic confession. It is therefore

an exciting time for us as we do everything we can to bring the pure Gospel as laid out in our Lutheran Confessions to as many as possible all around the world.

By Rev. Daniel Preus

July 6, 2013

Bergen, Norway

Soli Deo Gloria

ⁱⁱ Bill Hecht, *Two Wars We Must Not Lose*, (Fort Wayne, Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2012), 396.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 423.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 22.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 58.

^v *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 34.

^{vii} Walter O. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), pp. 516-517.

^{viii} Abdel Wentz, *A Brief History of Lutheranism in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955), p. 151.

^{ix} Forster, pp. 523-524.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 524.

^{xi} Kurt Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion: Missouri in Lutheran Perspective*, (Fort Wayne: IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977) 113-114.

^{xii} *The Report of the Synodical President to the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1972).

^{xiii} *The Report of the Synodical President to the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, 68.

^{xiv} *Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Convention Proceedings*, 1973, p. 139.

^{xv} *2010 Handbook, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (Saint Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2010), 13.

^{xvi} Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), p. 116.

^{xvii} Los Angeles Times, June 6, 2013.