

Emmaus Conference ✂ *May 5-6, 2011*
Parkland Lutheran Church, Tacoma, WA

Review of “Walking Together With Jesus,” by Mark G. Schroeder
John A. Moldstad, Reactor

The subject selected for this year’s Emmaus Conference piques the interest of confessional Lutherans, especially for all who yearn for the golden years of the old Synodical Conference. Our essayist, Pres. Schroeder, so ably shows how the Emmaus account in Luke 24 serves naturally as a bridge for this key doctrine of scripture frequently skirted by much of organized Christendom.

What *did* our Lord say that day along the road? “He explained to them what was written in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). We want to know more, don’t we? Pres. Schroeder lays important groundwork for the topic at hand by having us reflect on our Lord Jesus’ own use of Scripture with those two bewildered disciples. The resurrected Jesus in elucidating details from the inerrant writings of the prophets proves why *koinwniva* is so precious, not just in some kind of “coming together for a common cause,” but for the beautiful fellowship around his Word. This is how it was for the church in Acts, and this is how it is for the church today. Our God on that Emmaus road is not dead but alive! He has given us his living Word – that of the prophets and apostles – and this is the foundational basis for the church and its fellowship, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20).

By the way, I have to remind Pres. Schroeder that not all Muellers and Huebners and Schmidts (p. 5) are located in the German synods! As our essayist notes later on, a Schmidt was leader in the old Norwegian Synod. I think the Norwegians, including the sainted Pastor Bjug Harstad, the first pastor of this Parkland congregation, would be more than happy to transfer his legacy to either of the German synods! F. A. Schmidt, as many may know, served as the instigator of the unfortunate 1880s predestination controversy.

First of all, I commend the conference committee for being bold. The doctrine and practice of church fellowship is not easy. Nor is this subject just semantics. It is not simply the retelling of an historical split in 1962. This is the teaching from scripture which provides the protective hedge around the verdant garden of justification by grace through faith in Christ.

We live in trying times. A large segment of young people today is floundering spiritually and morally with little or no expectation of help from what passes as organized religion. According to a more recently published Barna Research project, those in the sixteen-to-twenty-nine year-old set, while in many cases having attended church during high school years, are “less likely to return to church later, even when they become parents.”¹ This is a reality stemming from an inundation of worldviews² at odds with the Christian faith. The perception of the younger generation is that religious truth for society and for them personally is too complex ever to be known. How vital, then, for churches to proclaim the entire truth from God’s Word! How crucial it is to hold out the only solid hope: Christ Jesus, who is set forth in Scripture as the world’s one and only Redeemer from sin and as the single entrance to heaven! How important it is to uphold the way in which Scripture directs all for spiritual edification: Word and Sacrament!

The teaching of church fellowship concerns the protection of God’s truth. In an egg toss contest a slight crack in the shell in one’s hand will easily go to a fully broken yoke when passed to another on the next turn. Something similar can happen in the transmission of doctrine. Therefore, we carefully seek to pass on to a succeeding generation the truth recorded in our Lord’s Book. We want no crack to appear in the shell encasing the life inside. It is not man’s doctrine; it is God’s! Jesus stated clearly, “...teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you” (Matthew

¹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian – What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), p. 23

² David Thompson in his book, *What in the World is Going On?* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2010), observes: “One does not have to sit at the feet of a teacher or professor to become a disciple of a particular worldview; worldviews are just as likely to be absorbed by osmosis” (p. 4).

28:20). Precisely because it is *God's* doctrine and needs preservation, Luther with his characteristic poignancy said: "Whoever really regards his doctrine, faith, and confession as true, right, and certain cannot remain in the same stall with such as teach, or adhere to false doctrine; nor can he keep on giving friendly words to Satan and his minions."³

History has proven how any church body disinterested in a substantial doctrine and practice of fellowship will in short order open the floodgates to full-blown higher criticism having its central focus on social gospel⁴. How did the ALC of the 1930s (then known as the American Lutheran Conference) go from a body claiming a fairly good statement on Scripture to an ELCA today that ordains practicing homosexuals and even non-Trinitarian formulas condoned in worship services?⁵ The answer, of course, has some complexity as erosion occurred in seminary classrooms and in administrative ecumenical endeavors, but a central point is this: the ALC never grasped and made as its own what the Synodical Conference once had – fellowship and corresponding discipline based on full agreement in all doctrines of holy scripture and as expressed in a *quia* subscription of the Lutheran Confessions. Rightfully, our essayist contends: "[S]ince the doctrine of fellowship is intimately linked with the commitment to hold faithfully to all of the doctrines of Scripture, only a correct understanding of fellowship, reflecting that commitment to the Word and the Confessions, can make possible the first steps in restoring a more far-reaching doctrinal unity among confessional Lutherans" (p. 10).

Three "C" principles are listed (p. 10) in the essay as imperative for a church's correct understanding of fellowship: to be **committed** to defending and

³ Walch XVII, p. 1477; the citation also is found in Bente's "Historical Introduction to the Symbolical Books;" cf. *Triglotta*, p. 94.

⁴ It always has baffled this reviewer that the most liberal church body (AELC, aka Seminex) of the three forming ELCA in 1988 had its origin in Missouri. Yet, it shouldn't surprise, if we note how insidious higher criticism is.

⁵ Three bishops of the ELCA officiated at an ELCA-sponsored worship service on **July 25, 2010**, where seven gay, lesbian and transgendered persons were received as pastors. Biblical language for God was removed from the liturgy; God was addressed as mother, and female pronouns were used. The CA service began with an ELCA bishop "confessing" the sins of "our church" when (in the past) it upheld Biblical teaching on sexuality.

proclaiming the Word of Christ without compromise; to be **consistent** in its confession and witness; and to be **compelled** by the gospel and guided by love. The first two probably are better known by confessional Lutherans. The latter is easy to overlook and needs diligent work being put into practice. To this crucial list, however, this reviewer humbly suggests the addition of one final “C”: to be **cognizant**. We need to be aware of Satan’s subtle ways to breach the bond of fellowship. As Pres. Schroeder alludes, such a breach attempt can arrive through the backdoor. A fellowship practice legalistically performed quickly and inevitable loses its heart for the saving Gospel of Christ. Schroeder’s words bear repeating: “The joy of the gospel is a joy that should never be celebrated alone. Because of the fellowship the gospel creates, it never needs to be alone” (p. 13).

Our Lord’s yeast illustration is a good one, both for the negative and positive aspects of fellowship. Jesus, himself the Bread of Life, used the culinary element in Matthew 13:33 to show the permeating effect of the gospel as his kingdom would spread. He used the same baking ingredient in Matthew 16:12 to indicate the ever-expanding nature of heresy once it is permitted inside the lump of pure doctrine.

We need to be yeast-minded not only in our hold on Romans 16:17⁶ but also in connection with Paul’s exhortation to “[m]ake every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). In his recently published book, *Bread of Life From Heaven*, Gaylin Schmeling states: “The doctrine of church fellowship is not a dry set of rules and regulations which hinders the work of the Holy Spirit and makes it almost impossible for Christians to proclaim the Gospel of salvation. The doctrine of church fellowship is rather a living truth from God’s Word connected to the very heart of the Gospel, the central article of faith, that a poor lost sinner is justified by grace for Christ’s sake through faith.”⁷

⁶ In the generally wonderful *Lutheran Study Bible* produced by CPH in 2009, one observes, however, with some concern that a marginal note could lead readers of Romans 16:17 to assume teaching differences here refer simply “to issues that strike at the heart of the Gospel.” (See also *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, vol. 51:1, p. 133.)

⁷ Gaylin R. Schmeling, *Bread of Life From Heaven* (Mankato, MN: Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary Press, 2009), p. 317.

As the ELS observed Missouri cozying up to the ALC, what was *most* disturbing was not the chaplaincy issue and scouting, etc. (yet these definitely needed attention); the chief concern was what was happening to Missouri's hermeneutical principles in connection with Scripture.⁸ The break with Missouri was especially hard for the ELS as it drew up its resolution of suspension in 1955, since up until 1946 (the seminary at Bethany began) virtually all ELS pastors were trained at Concordia in St. Louis. This meant for deep ties between the ELS and the Missouri Synod, which was affectionately known as the "big brother." In enacting the suspension of fellowship relations with Missouri, the ELS stated that an impasse had been reached and further negotiations would result in "indifferentism and in compromise of Scriptural doctrine and practice."⁹

This reviewer wishes to comment briefly on the essayist's mention of "prayer fellowship" and the Overseas Brethren (p. 41). I agree fully with the observation that the Overseas Committee in 1961 provided helpful insight on the subject. It is my impression that, while the Overseas Brethren did not use the "unit concept" terminology for the doctrine of fellowship, they were not expressing dissatisfaction with WELS and ELS on the inclusion of joint prayer. They desired to highlight the necessary distinction between the means of grace as marks of the church, which are never to be put on a par with human actions, and prayer, a human action – an expression of faith flowing from the means of grace at work. In regard to joint prayer, it is interesting that Walther *did* have prayers at early "free conferences" with non-fellowship Lutheran leaders (1850 – 1860), but he assumed the people gathered were all *quia* confessionals who just didn't know yet they were in agreement. Walther stopped the practice as their real colors became apparent.

⁸ Theodore A. Aaberg, *A City Set on a Hill* (Lake Mills, IA: Graphic Publishing, 1968); see pp. 160, 174, and 220.

⁹ ELS Synod Report 1955, p. 45. In the same report ("Suspension of Relations with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod") we find this telling, heartfelt remark: "The rest of the story is history—a tragic history to those of us in the Norwegian Synod who had grown to respect the Missouri Synod as a real bulwark of orthodox Lutheranism and to love our brethren in the Missouri Synod as deeply as our own brethren" (p. 43).

President Schroeder plows (or shall we say, re-plows) much ground in this essay. The Synodical Conference landscape of the 1950's and early 1960's was rocky. Have things leveled off? Not really. LCMS has been content to be on its own turf. WELS and ELS on theirs. Schroeder's concluding personal suggestions are worth pondering. Free conferences, in particular, are a start toward any concerted effort that might result in seeing the fertile soil of the old conference blossom once again.

On August 18, 2003, Rev G. Kieschnick, then president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, issued invitations to WELS and ELS to hold formal doctrinal discussions between the three church bodies. The purpose of the invitation, as related by Kieschnick, was to discuss possible ways for the church bodies to address areas of disagreement currently hindering fellowship between the churches, and also to explore ways to support and assist one another in facing contemporary attacks on the Gospel. Both the ELS and the WELS wrote letters declining the invitation.

In my letter dated September 25, 2003, I replied to the LCMS president: "In our estimation, the doctrinal differences that originally separated our two synods still remain. . . If it were the case that recent decisions and actions in the LCMS would appear, from our perspective, to indicate a sincere attempt to return to the scriptural position on the doctrine of church fellowship, we would be interested in holding intersynodical discussions. However, this is not the case."

Keep in mind this was not long after the well-publicized Yankee Stadium prayer service where Rev. David Benke, an LCMS District President, joined in conducting prayer in a worship service featuring not only a wide range of Christian denominations but also Muslim and Jewish religious leaders. Kieschnick defended the action of Benke, appealing to a 2002 synod resolution that reads in part: "Not every occasion where worship takes place is necessarily a manifestation of church fellowship. . . Pastors, teachers, and other officially recognized church workers are often asked to participate in activities outside of their own and other LCMS

congregations.” First Vice President Daniel Preus expressed his opinion that the Benke case was a flagrant violation of the scriptural fellowship principles. When he recused himself from adjudicating the case, the duty fell to the second vice president, Pastor Wallace Schulz. Pastor Schulz ruled that Rev. Benke was in violation of the scriptural church fellowship principles and therefore suspended him from the LCMS clergy roster. A synodical appeals panel, however, sided with President Kieschnick and lifted the suspension of Rev. Benke. Since the LCMS previously had gone on record saying that joint prayer is not church fellowship, how could anyone be surprised at the final outcome?

Have things changed? Is there a new fresh wind blowing from the city of the Arch? We were pleased to hear of Pres. Harrison’s election. Even with a healthy hand on the rudder, a sizable ship makes a turn slowly. Pres. Schroeder expressed his optimism in connection with the Colver article dealing with “cooperation in externals.” I am greatly encouraged by the same. It is also heartening to note Pres. Harrison’s remark in his significant 2009 volume of LCMS forefathers. Prefacing a potent but brief article by Dr. Franz Pieper entitled “Contending for the Truth,” Harrison editorially states: “Because Missouri’s position, particularly on the Gospel of universal grace, is that of Christianity in the very best sense, ‘So all Christianity on earth is basically united with us, and we fight not only for them, but also for their name.’ Missouri has a sacred task to confess the biblical Gospel and all its articles without abbreviation. We could not agree more.”¹⁰

Sincerely demonstrated efforts to adhere to clear teachings of Scripture are necessary for church bodies currently not in fellowship with each other to begin holding official doctrinal discussions with a view toward unity. In the year of 1938 the ELS produced a document entitled, “Unity, Union and Unionism.” An important thesis in this writing is as follows:

We hold that inter-synodical committees are useful in promoting Christian fellowship only when the various groups

¹⁰ Matthew C. Harrison, *At Home in the House of My Fathers* (Lutheran Legacy: 2009), p. 639.

or synods have, through their public ministry of the Word, given each other evidence of an existing unity in spirit, and it remains merely to establish the fact of such unity and to arrange for some public recognition and confession of that fact; or where it is clear that those in error sincerely desire to know 'the way of God more perfectly' (Acts 18:26).¹¹

Our prayer goes out for those striving to advance the cause of confessional Lutheranism. May God move the hearts of leaders to do what is right. May God also protect my own synod and all who strive for true confessionalism from arrogance and self-righteousness as we humbly seek to know the truth of his Word and boldly profess it in love before the world.

Finally, permit a brief comment on Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, a leading principle on fellowship to which President Schroeder refers on page 19 of his essay. Confessional Lutherans acknowledge that the *satis est* clause¹² of Augsburg VII is to be understood in light of Formula of Concord, Article X¹³, where reference is to agreement "in doctrine and all its articles." The expression "fundamental unity" at times is used for expressing the same concept in AC VII, but *when* the expression is used it needs careful definition. T. Aaberg provides this helpful explanation:

In stressing the scriptural requirement of doctrinal agreement for church fellowship one must bear in mind that among Christians, especially in congregations and church bodies, there will seldom, if ever, be more than a fundamental unity in doctrine and practice. This means that misunderstandings due to an incomplete knowledge and understanding of scripture may well arise among those who are in church fellowship. It does not mean an outright denial of any doctrine stated in Scripture, or a rejection of the Scripture itself.¹⁴

¹¹ The ELS periodical *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* in its June/September 2003 issue contains the reprint of a doctrinal work by our ELS forefathers in the year of 1938. The entire statement can also be found on the ELS webpage: evangelicallutheransynod.org

¹² "For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian 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" (Tappert, p. 32). In the 1970's moderates in Missouri appealed to this clause in support of what was termed "Gospel reductionism." Supposedly the pejorative label first was used officially by J. W. Montgomery in 1966.

¹³ FC X, 31 (Tappert, p. 616).

¹⁴ Theodore A. Aaberg's essay "Church Fellowship" was delivered to the ELS General Pastoral Conference in 1977. The essay is viewed in the ELS as a definitive presentation. You may find the essay in the Winter Issue of the 1976-77 *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*. For downloads of archived *LSQ* articles, go to www.blts.edu