

Emmaus Conference 2016
 “Are we experiencing the Lutheran Reformation Eve or Twilight?”
 Response to Dr. Lawrence Rast’s Essay
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Thanks to Dr. Rast for a stimulating paper, especially appreciated for the examination of that period of history in the life of our churches at the end of the Synodical Conference era. And what a delight to find a Missourian who, eighty years later knows about the Norwegian Synod’s *Triple U – Unity, Union, and Unionism!*

The theme chosen for this conference necessarily makes us take a close look at what we call “Confessional Lutheranism” and its appearance in America, especially in the Synodical Conference. That is the place where the interaction between the Missouri Synod and her smaller sisters, the Norwegian, Slovak, and Wisconsin synods chiefly took place.

The Synodical Conference is no more, but we still hold that venerable institution close to our hearts. The last phase of the disruption of the Synodical Conference took place while I was a student in high school, college, and seminary, so I was not a mature observer of it, but even so, much of it is very vivid in my mind. I remember the day my father came home from the 1955 ELS convention, very much out of sorts, very sad, almost despondent. That was the year that the ELS suspended fellowship with Missouri. He voted for it, but grieved for it, having graduated from St. Louis, served a Missouri Synod congregation, and had many friends there. During my college years at Bethany, many of my classmates and roommates were from the Wisconsin and Missouri synods; we were all well aware of the turmoil, and had great debates about it – in spite of our ignorance. By 1960, many of our good friends were gone because their churches had formed the CLC, departing from both ELS and WELS. Some Missouri Synod parents also withdrew their students from Bethany. In 1962, as a first-year seminary student, I was present in Chicago while the Synodical Conference met there. During that meeting, a separate communion service was held for the ELS and WELS alone at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church of the ELS, since at that meeting the ELS and WELS were withdrawing from the Synodical Conference, having already broken with Missouri. It was a very somber time. I remember at that service, dear old Oscar Naumann speaking, consoling the brethren, saying that they had done what had to be done, but ought not rejoice in it.

In my response, I would like to comment on the course of confessional Lutheranism in the Synodical Conference, more about its beginning than about its end. Though the venerable conference died, I think that we can say that in many of our free conferences and other gatherings like this one, its spirit lives on. There is much to be learned by looking at the circumstances under which the Synodical Conference broke up, as Dr. Rast has shown, but I believe that there is also much to learn from the circumstances that brought it into existence.

To speak of the Reformation, as though it is something we look toward or back on is inadequate, unless it is clear that we are talking about a clear, unconditional acceptance of the Book of Concord, which its authors claimed had the Augustana as its centerpiece, and was drawn from Scripture alone. The language we use about our confessions is that we subscribe to them unconditionally *because* they are a correct statement of the teaching of the Holy Scriptures: This is what the word of God teaches; this is how what we believe, teach, and confess is presented by us. And we ask our pastors and teachers to teach according to it. Luther, in many different ways repeatedly said “the entire Scripture points to Christ alone.” That is also

true of our confessions: since the doctrine of Scripture is set forth in the confessional writings, they too set forth nothing other than Christ and his redemptive work. When we say “Lutheran,” we mean – a preaching of the gospel, an exposition of Holy Scripture and Scripture’s doctrine means to point to Christ alone.

The Lutheran confessional writings are not mere historical documents reporting past events, or a bunch of sixteenth century spats, nor are they a record of the dogma held by our fathers; they are a confession of faith, not only theirs, but *ours*. Chiefly, they are proclamation. In fact, they don’t really reform anything; rather, they take a stand exactly in continuity with the Holy Scriptures, the apostolic Christendom of the New Testament, and the ecumenical creeds. They do what Luther said of Scripture – they point, through and through, to Christ alone. “Die ganze schrift treibt Christum.”

From its beginnings on American soil, the Lutheran confessional writings were certainly known. But since most of the immigrant pastors were German, they had their *Bekentnisschriften*. Some valued it; others not so much. In some areas, pietistic Lutheranism (an oxymoron) reigned, and the Concordia was not so valued. In others rationalism reigned, and the Book of Concord was disdained. There certainly were Lutheran people here and there who cared about the Lutheran confession, and some of them, very early on found each other, and were influenced by some fresh winds from Europe. Some of those winds must have led to the English translations of the book of Concord – the Henkel edition in 1851, Jacobs in 1882, and the *Concordia Triglotta* in 1921.

The place we would start, however, in the rise of the Synodical Conference was in Charles Porterfield Krauth. In his reaction against the American Lutheranism of S. S. Schmucker et al, Krauth in a series of articles collected as *The Conservative Reformation and its Theology*, prompted a renewal of interest in Lutheran confessional theology among eastern Lutherans. But what finally came to be the General Council, formed as a result of Krauth’s confessional theology, was not as thoroughly confessional as the newer arrivals on American soil, the Missourians and the Norwegians, would have liked to see. Their primary issue was the inconsistency between confession and practice. In December 1866, Krauth presented a set of theses on Faith and Polity as the basis for a new general synodical organization, and it was signed by thirteen synods including Pennsylvania, Ohio, Missouri, Norwegian, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, (these three later WELS), Iowa, Canada, and New York. A year later, however, in November 1867, when the General Council was formally organized, the Missouri and Norwegian Synods were absent, and stood apart from the Council. Later, they were joined by Ohio, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, groups with whom Missouri had not been amicable ten years earlier.

In 1870, the convention of the Joint Ohio Synod appointed a committee to confer with other synods with whom they were in doctrinal agreement in order to organize a conference of synods. The invitation went to the Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Norwegian synods. In January 1871, a consultation was held in Chicago with representatives from Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, Norwegian, and Wisconsin. They agreed to meet again in November of the same year, when the chief order of business was to be a presentation of the reasons for forming a separate conference of synodical organizations.

Leading up to the 1872 founding of the Synodical Conference, an *apologia* for not joining the General Council but instead forming a new Conference, a Memorial (*Denkschrift*) was written by F. A. Schmidt (then in good graces, though less than ten years later led the rebellion against Walther and the Norwegians in the Election controversy). In the *Denkschrift*, Schmidt

eloquently argued that true doctrinal unity could only be achieved on the basis of the Book of Concord, as a confession of the pure teaching of Scripture and an unambiguous practice of church fellowship. In a 1956 essay *The Synodical Conference – The Voice of Lutheran Confessionalism*,” (1956 Synodical Conference proceedings), Carl S. Meyer said that *Denkschrift* was the foundational document of the Synodical Conference, and I believe he was right. (See my treatment of it in the 1997 *Pieper Lectures Vol 2, Church Fellowship*). It was indeed the platform for a body that stood firmly on the Book of Concord, in contrast to S. S. Schmucker’s *variata* on steroids, *the American Recension of the Augsburg Confession*. But it was also addressed to the inconsistent practices in what appeared on paper to be soundly Lutheran, the General Council.

Schmidt formulated the issue this way:

Various Synods have stood opposed to each other and manifested a lamentably discordant spirit, not only in reference to this or that essential part of our Lutheran doctrine and practice, but even in regard to such primary questions as: the normative character of our symbols, the conditions of Lutheran church fellowship, the Scripturalness of our Lutheran Distinctive doctrines, the fundamental character of the difference between our Lutheran doctrine and church on the one hand, and on the other the various practices of the so-called Reformed church. Even in these and kindred questions – questions that concern the real basis of our church as an independent visible church-communion – there was no unanimity.

...It is quite a different question whether such a verbally correct confession is all that can be legitimately required of a communion for the purpose of testing its Lutheran character....The confessions of the church are certainly not intended to be merely an empty formula in the shape of one or more paragraphs in the constitution.”

After the Synodical Conference was formed in 1872, a series of theses on church fellowship by Wilhelm Sihler of Ft. Wayne, one of the predecessors of Dr. Rast, were discussed and adopted at the first conventions of the Synodical Conference, until 1879, when the discussion was interrupted by the Election controversy. In his theses, Sihler carefully spelled out the necessity not only for an unconditional acceptance of the Lutheran Confessions, but that all ecclesial practices must be in conformity with the doctrine set forth there. After establishing the thesis of the necessary connection between confession and practice, Sihler’s theses got specific, insisting that there could be no fellowship with those whose confession was ambiguous or in tolerating pastors who served also union churches. Consistency in confession and practice extended to agendas or altar books, catechisms, hymnbooks, and what he saw as being of paramount importance, doctrinal discipline. And that held the Synodical Conference together for six decades, until things began to crumble. (Sihler’s theses can be found as an appendix to my paper in the 1997 *Pieper Lectures* volume, and also in Lew Spitz’s *Life in Two Worlds*.)

Dr. Rast’s summation of the stretched-out-break-down of the Synodical Conference is spot-on. One of the prominent themes in the Norwegian Synod’s theses *Unity, Union, and Unionism* (1936. “*Triple U*” See ELS web site, els.org/beliefs/doctrinal-statements/) was that doctrinal agreement could not be based simply on the fact that two parties both subscribed to the same confession, but that practice must be consistent with the confession.

The *Triple U* writers refer to “many expressions of admiration for our uncompromising stand” but which must be “met with hand cupped to the ear and saying ‘What you are speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say’ — Emerson.”

Dr. Rast (p. 18) notes that the 1938 Missouri convention was a decisive point in Missouri’s shift in approach toward other church bodies. I would concur with that. But of course, that shift

had a history. It may be that that was the point of no return. It is interesting to note, however, that ELS' *Triple U* was actually begun in 1935, and adopted in 1936. It was certainly based to a large degree on its experiences in the triumphalistic Norwegian merger of 1917. However, that was not what occasioned it. In 1935, ALC (the 1930 merger of Iowa, Ohio, and Buffalo) and the ULCA (the 1918 merger of the General Synod, General Council, and United Synod of the South) extended invitations to the individual synods of the Synodical Conference to appoint committees to meet with them for doctrinal discussions. The Wisconsin and Norwegian synods did not, but Missouri did. While Missouri's acceptance did not, in the view of the Norwegians, mean that they were no longer agreed in doctrine, the Norwegians believed that it was a dangerous course, and not in keeping with the original principles of the Synodical Conference. *Triple U* was the ELS testimony as to why it was not advisable to hold discussions aiming at union with churches that had not shown by their confession and practice that there could be doctrinal agreement.

While the Norwegians were writing their *Triple U*, quite a way down the road the ALC committee prepared a document called *Declaration*, which practically became a parallel document to Missouri's *Brief Statement* so that the *Declaration* was to be interpreted in the light of the *Brief Statement*, a pretty hazardous approach.

That brings us to 1938: it did represent the significant shift on the doctrine of fellowship, but as Dr. Rast shows it didn't stop there. The *Statement of the Forty-Four* followed in 1945, and from that point, the divisions in the Synodical Conference widened to the point where they could no longer be bridged. At that point, there was probably no going back, though there were many noble efforts stretching out over twenty years. I suppose that one could say that there was no possibility of any sort of a turn around until the 1969 declaration of fellowship with the ALC (1960) – there's nothing like jumping into the frozen lake to wake you up. But the Synodical Conference itself was on life support until 1967, when the plug was pulled, and Missouri was off on its one decade whirl with the ALC.

Back to the question "Eve or Twilight" which we might also think of in terms of waxing and waning. Perhaps we might also want to think of Luther's so-called *Platzregen* passage, where he famously said: "O my beloved Germans [read "American Lutherans"], buy while the market is at your door; gather in the harvest while there is sunshine and fair weather; make use of God's grace and word while it is there! For you should know that God's word and grace is like a passing shower of rain [Platzregen] which does not return where it has once been . . . And you Germans [American Lutherans] need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay. Therefore, seize it and hold it fast, whoever can; for lazy hands are bound to have a lean year" (*To the Councilmen of Germany*, LW, 45, 352).

But our blessed Martin was not completely right – as you folks on this coast know, the rain does fall on the same place more than once. We know it in the Midwest too.