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LEST WE  
FORGET

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Paul F. Nolting, Pastor

### Divine or Human Origin?

For more than five years now we have been living together in the spiritual fellowship of a new congregation. We have our own church property. We are joined organizationally and spiritually with other like-minded believers in a new larger church group called the Church of the Lutheran Confession. We support and send our children to a new educational institution called Immanuel Lutheran College, located at Eau Claire, Wisconsin. There we train our future pastors, teachers, and lay leaders. We have our own separate mission program, here in the United States and far away in Japan. We publish a church paper for our members called the Lutheran Spokesman and a professional magazine called the Journal of Theology. We go our way alone--not because we want it that way, but because there is presently no group with whom we may share our singular confession of the Truth.

How did this come about? Was it of man or of God? More than one separation has occurred in local congregations and in larger fellowships because of personality clashes, disputes over property, and disagreement in matters of human judgment. How was it with our beginnings? No one can deny that the flesh played its unsavory role in the clash of interest, the interaction of personalities, and the course of events that led to our separating from our former fellowship and forming a new alignment. Every human action is unavoidably tainted with the influences of the flesh; we stand in need of daily and generous forgiveness. But if the flesh was in control of the situation, if the flesh supplied the motivation, if the flesh made possible the determination and the will to separate and consolidate that separation, then our origin was of man. Then we have sinned. Then the call to repentance is urgently needed. Then we must needs bring forth the fruits of repentance and return to our former brethren, humbly asking pardon for breaching the bond of fellowship.

But if our separation was of God, then another course makes its demands upon us. If the glory of our God's Name was at stake, if we were contending for the Truth against the subtle infiltration of error, if we were concerned about our souls' salvation and the eternal welfare of our children and grandchildren after us, if we were driven to do what we did and had to do by the Spirit of Truth, then our new fellowship on the local and synodic level is of God. Then there's not to reason why; there's but to do and continue. Then having put the hand to the plow, we dare not look back. Then we must fortify ourselves in the Truth. Then we must teach our children to know the reasons that compelled us to do in obedience that which we have done and are continuing to do.

### The Issue--Pure Spiritual Food

What was the issue? It concerned the spiritual eating and drinking of pure spiritual food. There was a time in the history of our country when there were no laws controlling food processing. Impure and harmful foods, false and misleading labels, unsanitary and disease-breeding conditions in food processing plants were common. When public protests became powerful enough, the government stepped in and began establishing standards for the processing, handling, advertising, and merchandising of foods and drugs in the interest of the physical health and well-being of the citizens. Now people are germ conscious. Who would think of drinking a glass of possibly impure water if a glass of pure and uncontaminated water were available? What parents would think of giving their infant children possibly impure milk or baby foods. We simply would not risk endangering the health of our children in this way.

## The Lack of Concern--for Pure Spiritual Food

But what is amazing is this--that whereas the concern over pure foods and drugs in the interest of the physical health and welfare of children and adults has increased and become a matter of national concern, the concern for the spiritual health of children and adults is diminishing. People who would rather go hungry than set impure food on the table for themselves and their children are quite willing and content to have themselves and their children served impure spiritual food. Why is it that people are unable to see and understand that error can harm and possibly destroy the spiritual life of a person just as impure food can harm and possibly kill the body?

## The Reason for This Lack of Concern

One reason for the lack of concern over impure spiritual food is the general despair of being able to discover the truth and of being able to be convinced that it is the truth. We live in a world of hundreds of competing Christian denominations, over 250 being represented in our country. Each claims and believes that it has the truth. But all, with their conflicting confessions, cannot have the truth. Which denomination or group has the truth? Are the claims of the Catholic Church to be accepted or the claims of Protestantism? If the claims of Protestantism are accepted, which denomination in Protestantism? If we select Lutheranism, which branch or synod of the Lutheran Church? Claims and counter-claims are made. Many people simply throw up their hands in despair. Who can know what is truth? The reason for the confusion is that people naturally tend to do too much listening to conflicting voices and to their own reason and too little listening to the voice of God in His Word. Certainty concerning what is truth cannot come out of the confusing claims and counter-claims of the many churches, but only out of individual Spirit-guided study of the Word. Such personal study must always have as its purpose the discovering of the Lord's truth, not the finding of proof for one's own prejudices or previously formed opinion. "What saith the Lord," must always be the question. The question dare never become, "What do I say?" After the truth of the Lord becomes clear to our minds and hearts, there remains but the task of finding that group upon earth which re-echoes the Word of the Lord in its preaching and teaching.

The ecumenical movement has introduced another difficulty in finding the truth. It is this that it is making the search for the truth seem relatively unimportant. What one believes seems to be of less and less importance. Almost everything and anything, from the "God is dead" theology to the denial of the Trinity and deity of Christ, is still considered "Christian." That means that the danger of error has been greatly diminished. Error has almost been made to appear as a healthy expression of the free and searching human spirit. But our Lord speaks of error as a leaven that affects the whole lump of Christian doctrine. In Matthew 16: 6 the Lord Jesus warns, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees." Matthew reports that at first the disciples failed to grasp the warning, but then they understood that He was warning them against the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees. After delivering a warning against glorying, St. Paul states as a commonly known and accepted truth the power of leaven, "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" I Cor. 5:6. Scripture also speaks of error as a canker or gangrene that tends to keep on infecting the body until it destroys life. II Timothy 2:17. And so it is. For just as an infection in the body, if not checked, will in time kill the body, so a spiritual infection in the form of error, if not checked, will tend to destroy saving faith in the Lord Jesus and so kill both body and soul eternally. But this has become a forgotten or despised truth in our day.

## For Us--Grace to See and Act

By the grace of God alone and not because of any superior spiritual wisdom or holiness of living on our part we have been able to understand and believe these things. We were able to see that our former synod, in defending and justifying its continued fellowship with erroristic Missouri, was corrupting the doctrine of fellowship in one particular area, the termination of fellowship. We observed how human reason forming judgments in spiritual matters and how majority opinions based on such judgments gradually displaced the simple observing and obedient acting that the Word of God required for the particular situation. Thus the authority of the Word was being undermined in but one area of a single doctrine. But even this little intrusion of error caused a very painful experience for many families, for faithful pastors who were determined to protect their Spirit-entrusted flocks from this impure spiritual food were quite unceremoniously relieved of their pastorates. It had become expedient for the synodic organization to tolerate a little bit of impure food rather than tolerate the preaching and acting of pastors and members who insisted that even a painful separation would be a small price to pay for the preservation of a pure spiritual diet. That separation is now history. Many of the wounds have healed. But with the healing it could well be that the vital lessons learned are beginning to fade from the memory. One lesson is to realize that error makes its appearance in an almost unnoticeable manner, that it tends to spread at a slow pace, but that it does spread and causes disobedience. Another lesson must also be learned: Once error has become entrenched in the public doctrine of a church body, it is most difficult to remove.

In order that lessons learned may not be so easily forgotten and in order to have available for easy reference materials pertinent to the case, we will present a series of quotations from the official Proceedings of recent Wisconsin conventions. These will reveal the gradual intrusion of error until it became officially embedded in the public doctrine of Wisconsin.

### 1953--Convention of Watertown and Milwaukee

This convention spelled out the issue that had been under debate between the Missouri and Wisconsin synods for years. The issue was unionism. That is simply the sin of worshipping together and doing spiritual work together with anyone who is guilty of preaching or tolerating false doctrine. This is viewing the issue from the viewpoint of the doctrine of the Church. Viewed from the viewpoint of the doctrine of the Means of Grace we can define unionism as the feasting of true believers with heterodox believers at a table furnished with impure spiritual food. Such eating is dangerous to the spiritual health and well-being of the diners.

The floor committee report, adopted by the convention, spelled out Wisconsin's case against Missouri as follows:

The issue that has opened this serious breach between our Synod and the Missouri Synod and threatened the continuance of the Synodical Conference is Unionism. Unionism is the underlying issue in the controversies regarding the chaplaincy, co-operation with unaffiliated church bodies in service centers, prayer fellowship, and scouting. The same unionistic spirit is observable in the arrangements that have been made for communion with Lutherans not in fellowship with us, under the excuse of emergency; in negotiations with lodges to make changes in their rituals, and in co-operating in various other areas with the excuse that safeguards have been set up to avoid unionism.

In this matter of unionistic practice Missouri has departed from the position that it once held, a position that made it a stronghold of the Church and a banner to repair to, and that was one of the strongest links that bound us together in the Synodical Conference. Missouri has broken that link.

Your Committee therefore make the following recommendations:

1. That we declare that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

a) by reaffirming its acceptance of the Common Confession as a "settlement of past differences which are in fact not settled" (Proc. 1951, page 146), and

b) by its persistent adherence to its unionistic practices, (the Common Confession, joint prayer, scouting, chaplaincy, communion agreement with the National Lutheran Council, cooperation with unorthodox church bodies in matters clearly not in the field of externals; negotiating with lodges and Boy Scouts of America with the plea that this gives opportunity to bear witness, under the same plea taking part in unionistic religious programs and in the activities of unionistic church federations; negotiating for purposes of union with a church body whose official position it is that it is neither possible nor necessary to agree in all matters of doctrine and which contends for an allowable and wholesome latitude of theological opinion on the basis of the teachings of the Word of God)

has brought about the present break in relations that is now threatening the existence of the Synodical Conference and the continuance of our affiliation with the sister Synod. (Proceedings, pages 103-104. Emphasis by underlining mine.)

Altho the words of the resolution, especially the parts underscored, indicate that the convention had "marked" in the sense of Romans 16, the convention applied Gal. 6:1-2 and Romans 15:5-6 to the situation. These passages, especially the Galatian passage, speak of the proper attitude and action of a Christian over against a weak brother who has been "overtaken in a fault." One of the chief factors restraining the 1953 convention from actions indicated and warranted by its observations was the felt need for the thorough instruction of all congregations regarding the issues and doctrines involved.

#### 1955--Convention of Saginaw

In his report to the convention President Naumann reviewed the inter-synodical developments since the 1953 convention. The sum and substance--situation deteriorates. Here is how he put it -

Differences in practice have increased and multiplied. . . . The differences that have arisen between us . . . have not been removed. They have increased. Things we consider contrary to God's Word have been defended with the statement, "That passage does not apply in this case." We have heard so often the expression "Synod's interests are sufficiently safeguarded." Matters which we named in our resolutions of 1953, which we considered dangerous to our souls' welfare, deterrent to our Gospel ministry, and detrimental to our fellowship in the Conference, have been and still are vigorously defended. The charges which we brought in an effort to do our brotherly duty before God, have been definitely denied. We have reached the conviction that through these differences divisions and offences have been caused contrary

to the doctrine which we have learned. And when that is the case, the Lord our God has a definite command for us: "Avoid them!"

For those of us who have been closest to these problems, it appears quite definite that we must now obey the Lord's Word in Romans 16:17. (Proceedings, page 13.)

It is quite obvious that President Naumann was expressing himself in the language of Romans 16:17. As the head of the synod and its chief representative in all inter-synodical dealings, he had "marked" Missouri as a causer of divisions and offences and was of the conviction that the situation demanded application of the "avoid" of the same passage. But immediately in the next paragraph President Naumann introduced a phrase that was destined to dominate the thinking, much talking, and no acting of the next half dozen years--"ray of hope." That elusive, phantom "ray of hope" dulled the thinking and paralyzed the will of the synod. Another ominous note appeared in the second last paragraph of the President's report:

We implore the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us as we try to decide in the face of all the reports whether the Lord would now have us apply His definite command "Avoid them!" or whether we still have an unpaid debt of love to those whose fellowship we cherished so many years. (Proceedings, page 14.)

This paragraph almost seems like the "two steps forward, one step backward" technique. Testify boldly, but keep the back door open for retreat! Does Scripture make contrary demands of us in a given specific situation? Does man have to assume the role of God and determine which Word of God should be obeyed? If so, man replaces God, and human judgment regulates obedience to God. Regretfully, these things developed from the seed planted in this part of the President's report.

So serious was the situation considered that the Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union assumed the unprecedented responsibility of wording and recommending a resolution for consideration by the convention. Here are the two preceding paragraphs and the resolution. As you reread them now, a decade later, note that the Standing Committee, acting in behalf of the synod, had "marked" Missouri and was recommending the complementary action of "avoiding" them.

In our dealings with our sister synod we have been earnestly endeavoring to heed the Scriptural exhortations to patience and forbearance in love.

We have, however, arrived at the firm conviction that, because of the divisions and offenses that have been caused, and which have until now not been removed, further postponement of a decision would be a violation of the apostolic injunction of Romans 16:17 (I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them).

On the basis of these considerations we recommend the following resolution, which we herewith submit for study by our brethren and for subsequent consideration and action by the synodical convention.

RESOLVED: That with deepest sorrow, taking notice of the fact that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is causing divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, we, in obedience to God's injunction to avoid such, declare the fellowship which we have had with said synod to be terminated. (Proceedings, page 79.)

For hours and hours Floor Committee No. 2 reviewed the reports of the President and the Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union and listened to the testimony of witnesses in open meetings. A specific problem that confronted the committee was the allegation that the charges made against Missouri did not constitute an accusation of false doctrine and that therefore separation from Missouri was not demanded by Scripture. The committee answered that allegation in this way:

Without entering upon the question of whether the present charges of our Synod against the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod do not already constitute the accusation of false doctrine, we believe that it should be reiterated in no uncertain terms that a specific charge of false doctrine is not a Biblical prerequisite for separation from a church body. A church body which creates divisions and offenses by its official resolutions, policies, and practices not in accord with Scripture also becomes subject to the indictment of Romans 17:17-18.

There follows then immediately the unanimous indicting or "marking" of Missouri by the Floor Committee:

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has by its official resolutions, policies, and practices created divisions and offenses both in her own body and in the entire Synodical Conference. Such divisions and offenses are of long standing (Cf. Proceedings 1939 - p. 159; 1941 - p. 43f; 74ff; 1947 - p. 104ff; 114f; 1949 - p. 114ff; 1951 - p. 110ff; 1953 - p. 95ff.)

On the basis of this indictment or in the language of Romans 16--after having "marked" Missouri as a causer of divisions and offenses, the Floor Committee presented the convention with the following resolution:

RESOLVED, that whereas the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has created divisions and offenses by its official resolutions, policies, and practices not in accord with Scripture, we, in obedience to the command of our Lord in Romans 16:17-18, terminate our fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

This resolution OBEDIENCE to the Word of the Lord demanded, but DISOBEDIENCE ruled the day because the resolution was not to be acted upon until the following year in a recessed convention. Thus after the President in his report, the Standing Committee in their report, the Floor Committee in its report, and the entire convention by its unanimous adoption of the Preamble of the Floor Committee report HAD MARKED Missouri as a causer of divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine, the convention refused in DISOBEDIENCE to adopt the complementary action of terminating fellowship with Missouri. The vote to DISOBEY prevailed by a margin of 94 to 47. Thus the Wisconsin Synod embarked upon a course of continued admonition and protest within the framework of fellowship with a church body that it had publicly declared to be erroristic. The leaven of error had received majority sanction.

#### 1956--Recessed Convention at Watertown

This was the "ray of hope" convention. Missouri had met earlier in June and had given some indication of reversing its liberal course but had given no evidence of removing the offenses that Wisconsin had listed in its indictment since 1953. The policy initiated by the Saginaw Convention began to unfold. That was the policy of continuing to admonish and protest within the framework of fellowship with a church body judged the preceding year to have been guilty

of causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of the Lord. To make this new policy possible and palatable the unanimous judgment of the Saginaw Convention that Missouri was at that time under the indictment of Romans 16 had to be removed. The method for accomplishing this was to decide in 1956 that the judgment of 1955 be retroactively held in abeyance. This mental maneuver of covering the clock by pretending that what was unanimously observed in 1955 was not really conclusively observed was recommended by the Standing Committee and accepted by the convention. With the unanimous "marking" of Saginaw thus thrust aside full reign could be given to the factor of HUMAN JUDGMENT. As could be expected, some emphasized the fact, freely admitted, that none of the offenses listed since 1953 had been removed. Others emphasized the "rays of hope" as they appeared and seemed to appear in connection with Missouri's statements on membership in the Lutheran World Federation and in regards to the Common Confession. Some had great hopes that the suggested "conclave of theologians" and the proposed unified Missouri-Wisconsin doctrinal statements would produce unity. Others were pessimistic. The convention failed to realize that it was striving to justify continued fellowship with an erroristic church body. The convention did feel uneasy about the situation but soothed its conscience with the resolution that "our fellowship with The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod be one of vigorously protesting fellowship to be practiced where necessary in the light of II Thessalonians 3:14 and 15." It should be noted that without realizing it this convention (1) Took the decision of terminating fellowship out of the hands of the common laymen and pastors of the synod and placed it in the hands of the specialists, for only they would be in a position to evaluate the subtle "rays of hope" over against static conditions and negative factors and trends and (2) Made the final outcome dependent upon the judgment of the majority of the convention as to the progress or lack of progress in the efforts to admonish rather than upon simple observation by all of the fact that Missouri had for years been causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine of the Lord.

Thus the convention ended with the new trend entrenched in synod policy. What would come next was predictable: the gradual awakening of some to what had actually happened and the efforts of others to justify the new course of action.

#### 1957--Convention of New Ulm

The time between the recessed convention of 1956 and the regular convention of 1957 was spent by the Standing Committee on Matters of Church Union in attempting through the Synodical Conference Convention, through meetings of the Joint Union Committees of the Synodical Conference, and through correspondence with the Praesidium of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to resolve, or at least begin to resolve some of the divisive issues that lay between the Wisconsin and Missouri synods. The results of all this activity were reported to the convention and reviewed by Floor Committee No. 2 (Church Union). Some on that committee continued to remain optimistic in regards to the prospects of resolving the issues in the future; more were pessimistic. Those who were optimistic found themselves in the position of justifying disobedience in the present to Romans 16 in the hope that the future would surely make obedience unnecessary. Thus an evaluation of the prospects for a successful outcome of the process of admonition had become for some THE FACTOR for determining whether it was the right time to obey or not to obey. But the majority on the committee felt that simple observation of the situation at the present demanded over-due and previously postponed obedience. After reviewing the struggle within the synod to face the compelling and long-existing facts of the situation and after rehearsing the frustrating efforts to resolve the issue with Missouri, the committee laid the matter before the convention in these words:

Since we now find that The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod still upholds resolutions and condones principles and practices which deny the Scriptural truth expressed in Article 28 of its own Brief Statement of Doctrine:

Since God ordained that His Word only, without admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, I Pet. 4:11, John 8:31,32, I Tim. 6:3,4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church bodies, Matt. 7:15, to have church fellowship only with orthodox bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16:17. We repudiate unionism, that is, church fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; II John 9,10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, II Tim. 2:17-21.

we feel conscience-bound to declare publicly, that these principles, policies, and practices create a division between our synods which The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod alone can remove. Until these offenses have been removed, we cannot fellowship together with The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod as one body, lest our own Wisconsin Synod be affected by the same unionistic spirit which finally weakens and destroys all true doctrine and leads to indifference and liberalism concerning Scriptural truth; therefore be it

Resolved, that we now suspend church fellowship with The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod on the basis of Romans 16:17,18, until the principles, policies, and practices in controversy between us have resolved in a thoroughly Scriptural and mutually acceptable manner; and . . .

The report of Floor Committee No. 2 failed to be adopted by a vote of 61 to 77. The convention thus found itself without any positive action taken in regards to the all-important matter of its relationship to the Missouri synod. This vacuum was filled by the adoption of the following resolution:

WHEREAS, our Synod, after long and patient debate, voted not to suspend fellowship with The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod at this time, therefore be it

Resolved, that we continue our vigorously protesting fellowship over against The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, because of the continuation of the offenses with which we have charged the sister synod, Romans 16:17,18, and . . . (Proceedings, pages 143-144.)

Note how the synodic DISOBEDIENCE since 1955 continued to involve the synod in contradictions. In the brief resolution, quoted above, the synod expressed itself in the language of Romans 16:17-18 as having "marked" the "offenses" of Missouri, but instead of "avoiding" Missouri, as the passage would demand, the synod voted to continue fellowship with Missouri. This contradiction was pointed out on the floor. President Naumann then used his powers of interpreting synodic resolutions to attempt to remove the contradiction by explaining that the Romans passage was used to explain the word "offense," whereas the fellowship was to be continued on the basis of II Thessalonians 3:14 and 15, as used by the preceding convention. But even this official explanation fails to remove the manifest self-contradiction of the resolution. Thus by direct resolution the convention was twice, in 1955 and 1957, brought face to face with the Lord's command in Romans 16:17 "to avoid." But twice the convention refused to heed and obey, preferring the path of DISOBEDIENCE to that of OBEDIENCE. At and after this convention professors, pastors, and

congregations began to leave the synod. The synod's response was to attempt to justify its position and course of action. The Protest Committee already indicated the manner in which that justification would be made when it reported that "Timing and human judgment appear to be basic sources of the difference of opinion in our circles concerning the problem at hand." (Proceedings, page 147.) Thus the ground work was being laid for the error to become formulated doctrinally and later to be officially submitted to a convention for endorsement.

#### 1959--Convention of Saginaw

At the conventions of 1955 and 1957 the Wisconsin Synod faced the decision in regards to fellowship with Missouri on the basis of the passage that applied to the situation, Romans 16:17-18. At both of these conventions Missouri was clearly and emphatically "marked" as a causer of divisions and offenses (No one arose to defend the errors of Missouri or to argue that they were not of long standing.), but the majority of the delegates hesitated and then backed away from the complementary command of St. Paul to "avoid" such as had been so "marked."

The recessed convention of 1956 and the regular convention of 1959 faced the same Missouri problem, but not directly in the light of Romans 16. These conventions were occupied chiefly with weighing the progress of admonition. The result was that the 1956 <sup>convention</sup> initiated the policy of "vigorously protesting fellowship," which was retained as synod policy by resolutions of the 1957 and 1959 conventions. The 1959 convention distinguishes itself only by the greater mass of material before the convention--all the reports and evaluations of the various forums that existed and were created for the purpose of admonishing Missouri in the hope of restoring her to the confessional foundation from which she had been slipping for years.

What was new at the 1959 convention was the official endorsement of Wisconsin's gradually evolving new doctrine of the termination of fellowship. Heretofore the Synod's position had been based on the dual exhortations of Romans 16:17-18, to "mark" and "avoid." The passage calls for intense observation to determine whether the situation described exists, and if it does, to react and act by "avoiding." But since the Synod already in 1953 and most pointedly in 1955 and again in 1957 had done the former, the intensive observing, but had failed to do the latter, the avoiding, it was quite natural that a rationalization and justification of the Synod's new course of action had to be made. This process had its slow beginnings, but reached its climax at the 1959 convention when a memorial entitled "A Call for Decision" compelled the Synod to choose between the old doctrine and the new. Instead of observing for the purpose of ascertaining whether the situation described existed, that is, continuance in error, the Synod began to concentrate its observation on one of the factors by which errorists may become manifest, that is, their reaction to admonition. No one has ever denied that a brother, when he falls into error, is to be admonished in love. St. Paul clearly urges that in Galatians 6:1. The rejection of such admonition is a factor by which the erring brother reveals himself to be no longer a brother but an errorist. This is observable and is to be observed carefully. But what gradually happened was that observing the reaction to the process of admonition, evaluating the same, and anticipating future possible results became an open end process that could be (and finally was) halted by a majority vote at a convention (1961). The 1956 convention had spoken freely of a "ray of hope" for a favorable response to admonition on the part of Missouri and had warned of "not closing the door." This way of thinking and manner of speaking became an ever deepening rut that

finally received formal, and by the 1959 convention official, expression in capsule form in the proposition: "Termination of church fellowship is called for when you have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail and that the erring brother or church body demands recognition for their error." (Report to the Protest Committee) Note that the decision for the present regarding the termination is made dependent upon a conviction regarding the future outcome of the process of admonition that is under way. Note also the tendency to think in terms of ascertaining impenitence rather than evidence of persistence in error. This led to a confusion of excommunication with termination of church fellowship. This manner of thinking and expressing oneself grew on the members of the Synod who were defending Wisconsin's continuing fellowship with Missouri at the same time Missouri's longstanding and publicly defended errors (Ex. Scouting) were being condemned. Floor Committee No. 2 (Church Union) reflected the prevailing majority opinion of the Synod when in its resolution "c" it instructed the Church Union Committee to continue its efforts until either agreement on doctrine and practice has been reached or "until an impasse is reached." Note the progression from "ray of hope" to "not closing the door" to "impasse." Thus official tension was created between the facts and realities of the present and the hopes and expectations of the future, with the latter governing the response to the former. The day of responding to the long-existing situation of the present was pushed into the unknown of the future.

The Church of the Lutheran Confession has expressed itself on this error, which received official endorsement by the Wisconsin Synod at its 1959 convention, in paragraph 61 of "Concerning Church Fellowship" -

We further reject the teaching that false teachers and churches are to be avoided only when they no longer listen to admonition. In those communions which agree with us that there must be unanimity in all doctrines of Scripture as a basis for fellowship, some teachers have arisen who have taught that an existing fellowship is not to be terminated as long as the errorist will discuss the issues involved and permit admonition to be addressed to them. Though this argument is presented in the sheep's clothing of Christian love and patience, we must condemn it as unscriptural and unionistic. When errorists by their adherence to their errors "cause divisions and offences" in the Church, we are told by the Holy Ghost through the Apostle Paul in Romans 16:17 to avoid them. To say in the face of this clear instruction that we are to fellowship with such as have become manifest errorists, simply because we are still admonishing them, must be condemned as disobedience to God, as allowing false teachers to ravage the flock, as disregarding the concern expressed in the next verse of Rom. 16 (lest "by good words and fair speeches they deceive the hearts of the simple") - in short, as belittling the Word of God and the importance of all revealed teaching. It can only, as must all unionism, lead to indifference to doctrine and to insecurity for the Christian in matters of faith.

#### 1961--Convention at Lutheran High, Milwaukee

This could be called the "impasse" convention. From the reports of President Naumann, the Commission on Doctrinal Matters, and Floor Committee No. 2 on Doctrinal Matters the convention received the considered judgment that an "impasse" had been reached in the process of admonition, specifically in the area of the principles governing church fellowship. The floor committee reviewed the entire matter and presented its suspension resolution, in part, as follows:

WHEREAS, The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has lodged many admonitions and protests with The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod during the past twenty years to win her from the path that leads to liberalism in doctrine and practice (Cf. Proceedings 1939, page 59; 1941, page 43f; 74ff; 1947, page 104ff; 114f; 1949, page 114ff; 1951, page 110ff; 1953, page 95ff), and

WHEREAS, Our admonitions have largely gone unheeded, and the issues have remained unresolved, and

WHEREAS, Many of the policies and practices which called forth our admonitions were in the field of fellowship, and

WHEREAS, The 1959 Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod therefore gave its Commission on Doctrinal Matters the directive "to continue and accelerate the discussions in the Joint Union Committees to bring about complete unity of doctrine and practice in the Synodical Conference . . . to give primary consideration in their discussions to the area of fellowship . . . to continue its efforts in the Joint Union Committees until agreement on doctrine and practice has been reached, or until an impasse is reached and no such agreement can be brought about" (Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1959, p. 195), and

WHEREAS, The Commission has faithfully carried out this directive but now regretfully reports that differences with respect to the Scriptural principles of church fellowship-differences which it holds to be divisive-have brought us to an impasse, and

Resolved, a) That we now suspend fellowship with The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod on the basis of Romans 16:17,18 with the hope and prayer to God that The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod will hear in this resolution an evangelical summons to "come to herself" (Luke 15:17) and to return to the side of the sister from whom she has estranged herself, . . .

What a contrast between the reasoning supporting this resolution and the reasoning advanced in support of the resolution offered the 1957 convention, the unanimously accepted observations of the Preamble in 1955, and the analysis of the situation given the 1953 convention! The emphasis in these three preceding conventions <sup>was on</sup> the situation as it existed, the fact that Missouri was guilty of causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine. In 1959 the emphasis shifted from observing the status quo to evaluating the process of admonition and arriving at the conclusion that further admonition would be of no avail because an "impasse" had been reached. This was the chief factor that the committee report urged for the support of its suspension resolution. A majority of 124 to 49 accepted this "impasse" argument and voted for the suspension resolution. (If the memory of the present writer serves him well, a post convention issue of The Northwestern Lutheran reported this "impasse" in the process of admonition as one of the causes and reasons for the suspension resolution. Another "official interpretation" subsequently urged that the "Whereases" were meant to furnish the historical background, while the suspension of fellowship was based on the injunctions of Romans 16:17-18. But this correction failed to appear in The Northwestern Lutheran.) Thus Wisconsin put its new doctrine into practice, finally suspending fellowship when a majority of the delegates at the convention arrived at the conviction that an "impasse" had been reached in the efforts to admonish Missouri. Four years later another Wisconsin convention had to deal with the problem of

fellowship relations with another church body, the Slovak Synod. The Sept. 19, 1965 issue of The Northwestern Lutheran reported that the 1965 Wisconsin convention voted "to continue in fellowship with the SELC (Slovak Synod) until our Synod has had opportunity to evaluate the outcome of our Commission's doctrinal discussion with the SELC and the decision of the SELC with respect to membership in the Lutheran Council in the United States of America." More evaluating and making present decisions dependent upon future events! This recent action of Wisconsin reveals that the doctrine, adopted in 1959 and put into practice over against Missouri in 1961, is still governing the policy of the Wisconsin Synod. No change!

### Why?--This Historical Review

One of the purposes of this paper is to gather together into one comparatively brief review pertinent quotations, chiefly from the official resolutions of the Wisconsin Synod conventions, so that the reader will have them available for ready reference. The aim most emphatically has not been to reopen old wounds or to wave with spiritual pride a "we were right" flag. We disavow any such motives as evidences of the flesh. But it is a matter of human experience that facts and details once clear in the mind tend to become vague with the passing of time, especially when the issues are no longer of every day concern. It follows then that it is very easy to forget lessons that were learned the hard way. Such forgetting could be spiritually dangerous, for it would condition us to accept with little resistance offerings of impure spiritual food. For wherever error finds shelter for any reason and under any circumstances, there spiritual food poisoning is likely to occur. LEST WE FORGET the lesson learned, here is a brief summary -

1. Balanced perspective. This review has been written by one who was an active participant in the events and actions recorded. It was written for people who lived through these soul-baring years. It is quite possible that our personal experiences may cause us to think of Wisconsin as THE ENEMY and Missouri as the SECOND ENEMY. That would be an extremely biased, yea a false way of looking at the matter. There is in heterodox churches, that is, in churches that by their public confessions teach or tolerate error in doctrine and practice, a descending scale of error. Wisconsin is, without a doubt, guilty of least error and so is closest to us in doctrine and practice. Missouri may well come next, then through the other Lutheran synods, the Reformed churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and then on to unchristian sects as the Jehovah's Witnesses. We need to keep a balanced perspective, neither minimizing nor exaggerating the errors of our former brethren.

2. Gradualness of the intrusion of error. As in society so also in the church corruption never springs forth full grown. The beginnings are always very slight and difficult to discern, but the potentiality for growth is always present. So also in this case. First came the spiritual paralysis that prevented action as the Synod faced the "far reaching spiritual consequences" in 1955. Then began the inevitable process of self-justification until error received official recognition at the 1959 convention.

3. Chain reaction of error. Error cannot be contained and isolated. Scripture uses the picture of yeast permeating a lump of dough to illustrate its spread. In this case error developed in a sub-division of the doctrine of fellowship, namely, the termination of an existing fellowship. In order to justify that error the authority of Scripture which speaks on that point had to be violated. Next the calls of pastors and professors who contended for the Scriptural doctrine had to be violated to preserve the interests of Synod.

4. Difficulty of removing error. Once error has received official standing in a church body, it becomes most difficult to remove. The tendency always has been for theologians to defend what they have formulated in writing. Such subtle pressures as the fear of "losing face" on the part of synodic leaders may also sub-consciously play a part. The difficulty that we have experienced these past five years to arrange a fruitful forum for the removal of the differences between the CLC and Wisconsin bare this out. Let us at all times beware lest our flesh, in any way or manner, contribute towards maintaining the barrier between us!

5. Confidence in the Lord, not in church princes. The 118th Psalm became a favorite of Luther during the trying days of the Reformation. He learned the futility of trusting man, even the princes among men. We have learned the same lesson. During the past controversy we all looked with great hope towards some who contended nobly in word for the cause of the Truth. But so many never were able to generate the strength of faith necessary to translate their fine testimonies in words to testimonies in action. When the iron is hot, it bends in many different ways. But there is always One whom we can always trust with assurance. That One is our Lord who never shames or lets down those who rest their trust and hope in Him.

6. Scale of values. What is more important? That is a question that arises again and again in the life of a child of God. So often we read and hear the story of God's testing Abraham by commanding him to offer up his son as though this were a single historic event in the life of an Old Testament saint. No, this is a constantly re-occurring event, in varying degrees of intensity, in the lives of God's children. So in this controversy. Clergy and laity had to decide which was more important: faithfulness to the Word of the Lord or preservation of one's job, securing one's salary, professional and social position, keeping the church property, and so on and on.

7. The error. With all the writing it is quite possible to forget what the point of the controversy actually was. Our younger people especially ask questions and are entitled to answers. There are different ways of expressing the nature of the error in this controversy, for example:

- a. Continuing to admonish as brethren within the bonds of fellowship those who have been recognized as errorists.
- b. Failing to terminate fellowship with those manifestly causing divisions and offenses in the church.
- c. Making the outcome of the admonishing process THE FACTOR that determines whether fellowship should be continued or terminated.
- d. Evaluating reaction to admonition instead of observing adherence to error to determine whether or not fellowship should be terminated.
- e. Judging the present in the light of future probabilities and possibilities or ignoring the facts and realities of the present in the hope that the future will bring improvement in conditions.

Even as the Truth is manifold in its beauty, so is error manifold in its deceptiveness!

God's Word is our great heritage  
And shall be ours forever;  
To spread its light from age to age  
Shall be our chief endeavor.  
Through life it guides our way,  
In death it is our stay.  
Lord, grant, while worlds endure,  
We keep its teachings pure  
Throughout all generations. Amen.

