



# THE SYNODICAL CONFERENCE FOUNDED ON FUNDAMENTAL UNITY

Celebrating the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Founding of  
the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America

Saint John Evangelical Lutheran Church, Milwaukee ✝ July 10, 2022

## The Stephanite Emigration

1. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, **religious unionism** was being imposed by German governments in an effort to end religious division between Lutheran and Reformed Christians and to stave off encroaching Rationalism in their provinces. The Prussian Union was a prime example of this state effort. Implemented by King Frederick Wilhelm III beginning in 1817, it compelled Lutheran and Reformed churches to use a common agenda for worship and to celebrate Holy Communion together.
2. Throughout the 1830s, a gifted Lutheran pastor from Dresden, **Martin Stephan**, warned his growing congregation that state-imposed unionism was coming to Saxony, so he pushed for a mass emigration to America. Pastor C.F.W Walther later described Stephan's separatistic views and practice of church fellowship.

*"The visible Lutheran Church was the Church to him, apart from which there was no salvation. And he imagined that he alone and those who joined up with him were the visible Lutheran Church, so that among the Saxons who blindly followed him this was considered a settled matter and whoever wanted to be saved must flee with them and gather with them where the existence of a true Lutheran Church would be possible. Whoever would not want to forsake the fatherland was viewed as a person who, if not already lost, stood in the direct danger of his soul. Many, set and pressed by their consternation of conscience often, for that reason, severed the most holy bonds of natural love, of blood and calling, in order only to follow the 'emigrating Church' and to remain with her."<sup>1</sup>*

3. Stephan ran afoul of the law in Dresden beginning in 1836, prompting him to increase the pressure on his followers to emigrate. Eventually, he convinced them that he was their "chief means of grace," apart from whom there was no salvation. **The Stephanites** had degenerated into a **Donatistic, religious cult**.
4. The Stephanites departed Germany in November 1838 and began arriving in St. Louis on February 19, 1839. They settled in St. Louis and Perry County, Missouri. But Stephan's scandalous life was suddenly exposed, and he was unceremoniously deposed by his fellow pastors in May 1839.
5. Debate raged for many months among the Stephanites about the legitimacy of their emigration, their church, and the nature of their fellowship.
6. During this time, **C.F.W. Walther** grew in sympathy toward **weak Christians** who are often duped by **false teachers**, as he had been. He came to realize that there are no perfect Christians or churches and that it was dangerous to believe there are. He wrote to his brother Otto Hermann Walther on May 4, 1840:

*"Oh, dear brother, my eyes are also being opened more and more about the Stephanite emigration. It was truly an abominable undertaking ... [that included] the disgraceful idolizing of Stephan, the sectarian joining together, [and] the condemnation of other honest people. ... A person can be standing*

<sup>1</sup> C.F.W. Walther, "Foreword to the Fourteenth Year of *Der Lutheraner*," Joel Baseley, trans., *Der Lutheraner* 14, no. 1 (August 25, 1857), 1.

*in grace, be of an upright heart, and be enlightened by the Holy Spirit in all things necessary for salvation; nevertheless, for a longer time he can remain in uncertainty about many things that concern his inmost circumstances, sins, and errors; also much of his past may still cling to him, and he may even hold and defend falsehood. Often knowledge exceeds sanctification, or sanctification exceeds knowledge. Therefore do not judge and ban immediately! ... All we can and must do is to keep on teaching, admonishing, reproving, praying, pleading, until the brother perceives the truth in us. In this way our situation becomes for us a school of wisdom, humility, gentleness, patience, love, and zeal. ... If the existence of a truly Lutheran congregation were determined by unwished-for, residual errors, a wrong dividing of the Word because of inexperience (be it of the law or of the gospel), so long as it does not contain false doctrine that destroys the foundation, then no one would ever, ever be certain if he belonged to the Lutheran Church or a sect.”<sup>2</sup>*

7. In a September 1840 letter to Louis Eduard Nollau, a local Evangelical pastor in St. Louis, **Pastor O.H. Walther** opined that “*the blind, orthodox spirit of condemnation*” within old Lutheranism “*spells a greater danger than the unionistic spirit that is born of a false love and hope. The false Lutheranism, in which I joined as a Stephanite, stifled my love and gradually severed all the roots of my spiritual life and surely would have landed me in hell if God would not have had mercy on me.*”<sup>3</sup>
8. At the April 1841 **Altenburg Debate**, C.F.W. Walther underscored how no church in this sinful world could ever be perfect, therefore church fellowship can never be based on complete agreement. When it comes to practicing church fellowship, he emphasized the **necessary distinction that must be made between false teachers (stubborn errorists) and their untrained followers (weak Christians)**, as St. Paul modeled in his letters to the Galatians and Corinthians and prescribed in Romans 14:1 & 16:17.

*“I find that some of us, in exposing and reproving the sins committed by certain ones, do not make a proper distinction and thereby cause many consciences to be burdened beyond endurance. Do not some now seek to obliterate the distinction between the seducers and those who are led astray? Is a confession of guilt not often demanded of those who were led astray, whereas the guilt rested only on the seducers? ... Are not those who yielded to pressure of those who did violence to their conscience and therefore accepted many a false point treated as if they were equally guilty with those who first tyrannized them and then foisted the error upon them with force, thereby burdening their consciences?”<sup>4</sup>*
9. For the remainder of his life, **Walther constantly recalled the necessary distinction between Christians who are weak in faith or understanding and errorists who cling stubbornly to their position against better knowledge and seek to divide God’s people and gain a following**. He repeatedly emphasized that human weakness will always make complete agreement an unachievable goal for expressions of church fellowship and maintained that it can only be founded on **fundamental unity**. He also warned that those who insist on complete agreement are naturally prone to the same exclusive separatism and sectarianism by which he had been enslaved under Stephan’s leadership.

## The Saxons Seek Fellowship with Grabau

10. Initially, the Saxons and **Pastor Johannes Andreas August Grabau** of Buffalo, N.Y., shared some warm expressions of church fellowship via personal correspondence. They had preliminary discussions about ministry cooperation and joint pastoral training. One Saxon candidate, Theodore Brohm, even received and accepted a call to serve a congregation of Grabau’s people in New York City.
11. The relationship between Grabau and the Saxons quickly deteriorated for a number of reasons:

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<sup>2</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *Letters of C.F.W. Walther: A Selection*, Carl S. Meyer, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 34, 37, 40. Emphasis in original.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Joh. Ph. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (Sauk Rapids, Minnesota: Sentinel Printing Co., 1981), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in P.E. Kretzmann, “The Altenburg Debate,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 12, no. 3 (March 1941), 169.

- a. Grabau issued a “**Pastoral Letter**” (*Hirtenbrief*) in 1840 that echoed Stephan. When the Saxons offered their official critique in July 1843, Grabau accused them of heresy. In 1852, Walther recalled, “*When we read this Hirtenbrief, we were not a little frightened, since we found in it the errors that had quite recently and perniciously resulted in sad experiences for us, and from which we had just been saved by God’s abundant grace and patience.*”<sup>5</sup> As the Saxons grew in their acquaintance with the legalistic and separatistic pastoral practices of Grabau and his colleagues, their fears about expressing church fellowship with them grew exponentially.
  - b. In late 1841, a former Saxon, **Pastor E.M. Buerger**, began serving a group of Buffalo Lutherans who had been excommunicated by Grabau, leading to further tension between the two camps.
  - c. Two Saxon pastoral candidates, **Gottlieb Kluegel** (1843) and **Carl Geyer** (1844), began serving Grabau’s people in southeast Wisconsin. In 1847 **Pastor E.G.W. Keyl** was called to serve Trinity, Freistadt and Milwaukee. Grabau considered them rabble-rousing preachers (*Rottenprediger*).
12. Grabau and his **Buffalo Synod** (1845) would quickly become Walther’s constant foil, especially when it came to patient, evangelical pastoral practice. **Grabau considered the Missourians unionists** because of their willingness to demonstrate patience toward weak Christians and express church fellowship with them apart from what he considered complete agreement. By 1854 Walther considered Grabau and his Buffalo Lutherans “*a second, unimproved edition of Stephan and his people.*”<sup>6</sup>

### The Founding of the Missouri Synod

- 13. In 1842, **Pastor Wilhelm Loehe** began sending “**emergency helpers**” (*Nothelfer*) to America. He was spurred on to even greater support after **Pastor Friedrich Wyneken** published his important pamphlet “The Distress of the German Lutherans in North America” in late 1842.
  - 14. Among the most gifted men Loehe sent was **Dr. Wilhelm Sihler**, who joined the Ohio Synod but quickly became disgruntled with its unionistic practice. He withdrew in 1845. After reading the first issues of Walther’s new church paper ***Der Lutheraner***, he wrote to the St. Louis pastor on December 11, 1844.
- “The Lord be praised that he has bestowed upon you and your fellow witnesses such a fitting witness for the faith, confession, and doctrine of our church, a witness so decisive in substance, so mild in form, and at the same time so correct in expression.”*<sup>7</sup>
- 15. Sihler asked Walther a series of questions about the Missourians. In reply, Walther described a deep desire to extend the hand of fellowship to others and deep regret about their former separatism.
- “We, who in unbelievable blindness formerly permitted ourselves to be led by Stephan, have special reason to seek out those of orthodox faith in order to be assimilated also into their outward fellowship. Besides, we would give the enemies cause to consider us a special sect and to treat us as such. And God knows that we ourselves under Stephan had nothing else in mind but to prove ourselves completely faithful to the true Lutheran church. But there was nothing which caused us to fail in this very thing more than our stubborn exclusiveness. The more dangerous and corrupting this became for us the more we now yearn for the careful preservation of catholicity and the avoidance of every type of separatism.”*<sup>8</sup>
- 16. Fraternal expressions of fellowship were immediately offered in writing. However, it is important to note that **there was never complete agreement between these men** because of a lack of comprehension and proper instruction in some matters. But that did not deter Walther from readily extending the hand of

<sup>5</sup> C.F.W. Walther, “Foreword,” *Der Lutheraner* 9, no. 1 (August 31, 1852), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Peter M. Prange, *Wielding the Sword of the Spirit, Volume One: The Doctrine and Practice of Church Fellowship in the Missouri Synod, 1838-1867*, (Wauwatosa, Wisconsin: John Ph. Koehler Press, 2021), 308.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Lewis Spitz, *Life in Two Worlds* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 41.

<sup>8</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *Selected Writings of C.F.W. Walther: Letters*, Roy Suelflow, trans. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 86.

church fellowship to Loehe's men, though he faced criticism for doing so. He explained the rationale for his evangelical practice of church fellowship in a March 1846 letter to Brohm, in which he was especially critical of Grabau's legalistic doctrine and practice of church fellowship.

*"I must confess to you that for the sake of the 'dead orthodoxists' I have abandoned all timidity and am keeping an even closer eye in Der Lutheraner on the [principle that] 'each one is presumed innocent [until proven guilty].'" Let the foolish zealots, arrogant and carnal watchmen of Zion, think that I surrender to the false believers. I cannot be deterred by this in order to proceed neatly with the boy Absalom [2 Sa 15:11]. It must be kept in mind how little opportunity most of the so-called Lutheran preachers here have to get to know the true doctrine and its history. If those things are immediately withdrawn, then the entrance into their hearts is completely closed off. But if one does not immediately dismiss them as being stubborn, they are more willing to listen. America is evidently a field where many a plant can thrive if carefully cultivated. I hate the sectarian sentencing and jailing of the Grabauian-minded crowd. I hope to God that our unsuspicious accommodation (unargwöhnisches Entgegenkommen) has already produced more and better results than all the lightning and thunder that some foolish zealots desire."<sup>9</sup>*

17. Ongoing, fraternal correspondence and a number of face-to-face meetings between Loehe's men and the Saxons quickly led to the founding of the **Missouri Synod** on April 26, 1847 in Chicago. While the Saxons were largely looked upon as the synod's theological specialists, the Loehe men provided a lion's share of the manpower and mission zeal for the fast-growing church body.

### Open Questions and the Iowa Synod

18. In the late 1840s, a public disagreement broke out between Loehe and Walther over the doctrines of church and ministry. Once again, the Missourians were haunted by the specter of Stephan.
19. But Walther's more fundamental concern had to do with Loehe's unwillingness to take a completely unqualified (*quia*) stance on the **Lutheran Confessions**. Loehe believed it was necessary for Lutheran theologians to pursue **doctrinal development** (*Lehrentwicklung*) beyond the doctrinal presentation of the confessions, even on the articles of faith set down in the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. With many German theologians, Loehe was a vocal proponent of "**open questions**." As far as Loehe was concerned, holding opposing positions on certain doctrinal points like church & ministry and millennialism need not be divisive of church fellowship. Already in 1845, Walther expressed his misgivings about the confessional tendency he noticed in Loehe and some of his disciples.

*"Anyone who would like to commit himself to the Book of Concord cannot, because of human hope for blessing, be yoked with those who do not want to emphasize certain, clearly revealed teachings. If a Lutheran synod is to avoid ingesting the germ of dissolution, even such subtle syncretism [i.e., unionism] must be made impossible for its members by its principles."<sup>10</sup>*

20. When Loehe made an attempt in 1849 to referee the bloody war over church and ministry between the Missouri Synod and Grabau, it made matters worse. Loehe leaned heavily in Grabau's direction on the question. Walther published his famous 1852 volume *Church and Ministry* (*Kirche und Amt*) in response.
21. Even before Walther published that volume, he and Wyneken were delegated by the Missouri Synod to travel to Germany in 1851 in an attempt to negotiate peace with Loehe. Though Walther described their visit as a success, a controversy broke out in 1852 among the Loehe men in the **Michigan Franconian colonies** over the doctrines of church and ministry. Two new Loehe arrivals refused to accept and teach Missouri's position (one even refused to join the synod). They insisted it was an open question. Synod

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Peter M. Prange, *Volume One*, 164-165.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Peter M. Prange, *Volume One*, 190.

President Wyneken strongly urged them to take their ministry elsewhere since they disagreed in an article of faith. For all intents and purposes, the synod's relationship with Loehe had ended.

22. A group of 22 people left the Michigan colonies in September 1853 and migrated to eastern Iowa. In 1854, they established the **Iowa Synod**. Brother **Sigmund and Gottfried Fritschel** joined Iowa's ranks in 1854 and 1857, respectively, and became thorns in Walther's flesh, especially with regard to the level of agreement necessary for recognizing and expressing of church fellowship. They also advocated for open questions, and the Iowa Synod wore their unique theological "tendency" (*Richtung*) as a badge of honor. Walther was convinced that this approach inevitably leads to confessional disintegration and unionism.
23. For their part, the Iowans always understood Walther and the Missourians as insisting on complete agreement in all doctrine before church fellowship could be recognized. But **Walther emphatically, repeatedly, and publicly corrected this false understanding**. For instance, at the 1867 colloquy between the Missouri and Iowa Synods in Milwaukee, he explained to the Iowa representatives:

*"Nothing whatsoever that God clearly revealed may be called an open question. But it is an altogether different question how I must deal with an erring person, lest he sink deeper into error and Satan devour him. I would not jump at the conclusion that a man must be a heretic even though he err in the important doctrine concerning the Trinity, let alone if he erred in a lesser point. Only one who teaches in such a way that he attacks the personal foundation (Christ himself) or the dogmatic foundation (the sum total of all fundamental doctrines) or the organic foundation (the Scriptures), and in spite of repeated admonitions insists that he will not give up his error—only such a one I will condemn as a heretic but not one who does not attack the foundation, in other words, not anyone who may err in some other point, but is willing to receive instruction. I am convinced that in this life we cannot attain more than a fundamental unity."*<sup>11</sup>

24. The following year, **Walther provided further clarification on what he meant by fundamental unity**:

*"We are far removed from the position that severs fraternal relations with an individual and stops having church fellowship with a church body if in their understanding of Bible-teaching they are not dogmatically correct. We by no means consider such correctness a condition of fellowship. If that were our position, we should have to contend against ourselves; for while we notice incorrect views—that is, errors, in others—other people may notice such imperfections in one or the other of us. No; as soon as an individual or a whole church body manifests the attitude of willingness to submit unconditionally to the whole Word of God and not teach anything that opposes the Christian faith, be it the real or the dogmatic or the organic foundation, we extend in every case with joy the hand of fellowship to such an individual, and we are altogether willing and ready to cultivate church fellowship with such an organization. This, however, is our position and practice, not because we consider any teaching clearly revealed in the Word of God an open question that one may either affirm or deny and concerning which there is liberty of opinion, but because we know that there are errors that proceed from weakness, just as there are sins that are caused by weakness, and that a Christian may intellectually err even with respect to a fundamental matter without subverting the foundation in his heart."*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted John Ph. Meyer, "Unionism," *Essays on Church Fellowship* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), 63-64. Emphasis in original. See J.P. Beyer, *Stenographisch aufgezeichnetes Colloquium der Vertreter der Synode von Iowa und der von Missouri, Ohio, u.a. St., gehalten vom 13.-19. Nov. in Milwaukee, Wis.* (Chicago: Chicago Union, 1868), 76.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in C.F.W. Walther, "The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions," *Church Fellowship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 103-104. Walther relied heavily on the insights of Lutheran theologian **Johann Gerhard**, who explained, "We therefore have to distinguish between that absolute, perfect unity, free from every form of disharmony, which is found nowhere except in the Church Triumphant, and that fundamental unity, which consists in agreement concerning the principal articles of doctrine, while with respect to a few less important points of faith or to ceremonies that are a matter of indifference or to the interpretation of some Scripture passages controversies will arise. And this is the unity obtaining in the Church Militant; for in this Church there is never found such a

25. Walther summarized his position in a series of theses on open questions in 1868. Thesis V plainly stated:

*"The Church Militant must strive for absolute unity of faith and doctrine as its goal, but it never attains higher than a fundamental level of unity."*<sup>13</sup>

26. How did Walther define fundamental unity? It was certainly not “fundamentalism” or a unionistic, least-common-denominator theology. Instead, fundamental unity means sharing a **common attitude** toward **holy Scripture** in which Christians happily submit to the clear Word of God as the sole arbiter of all doctrine and life. And then for faithful Lutherans that common submission insists on confessing **fraternal agreement on the articles of faith**, articulated by and for Lutherans primarily in the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. In 1860 he explained that *"when it comes to those fundamental articles of faith that are clearly and plainly revealed in God's Word ... we do indeed demand full agreement for entering into church fellowship."*<sup>14</sup> In 1867 he summarized his position succinctly, *"We consider every church that honestly pledges its loyalty to (the Unaltered Augsburg Confession) to be a beloved sister-church. It is a sister-church of ours in a much more real sense than a communion that formally pledges loyalty to all the Symbolical books, but only on a conditional basis."*<sup>15</sup>

### The Synodical Conference: Founded on Fundamental Unity

27. The Missouri Synod established church fellowship with the **Norwegian Synod** (1853) without a formal colloquy when the latter resolved in 1857 to have their theological students trained at Concordia, St. Louis. **Pastors Jacob Aal Ottesen** and **Lauritz Larsen** were among the leaders. But **controversies over slavery, absolution, and the doctrine of justification**—and differences in language and culture—often led to strife among the Norwegians, partly due to their connection with the Missourians. This would have a significant impact on the **Election Controversy** that disrupted the Synodical Conference from 1877-1887.
28. For many years Walther and his fellow Missourians published criticisms of the **Ohio Synod** (1818) and **Wisconsin Synod** (1850) for their **unionistic church practices**, exacerbated by congregations’ close proximity to one another. They criticized pastors who administered Holy Communion to both Lutheran and Reformed Christians without taking a firm confessional stand and were indignant when Missouri members joined Ohio and Wisconsin congregations after disputes over private confession or to avoid church discipline.
29. After 1855, there was a growing confessional Lutheran spirit coming to foreground in both the Ohio and Wisconsin Synods. **Professor Matthias Loy**, who was considered a “Missourian,” was the strongest confessional voice in the Ohio Synod. In the Wisconsin Synod, the movement was largely driven by **Pastors Philipp Koehler and Johannes Bading**, who were later joined by **Professor Adolf Hoencke**.
30. At first the Ohio, Wisconsin, and **Minnesota Synods** (1860) all seemed destined to find a home in the **General Council (1867)**, established under the leadership of the increasingly conservative Pennsylvania Synod. But when the Council vacillated on immediately disciplining unionistic practices (the so-called **Four Points**) within its ranks, the Ohio Synod refused to join. The Wisconsin and Minnesota Synods withdrew from membership in 1869 and 1871, respectively.
31. Though Walther and his fellow Missourians were still offering public criticism of the Wisconsin Synod as late as March 1868, representatives of the two synods met for a brief colloquy in October 1868 and quickly recognized each other’s church bodies as orthodox. Walther was said to have exclaimed afterwards,

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definite harmony that no disagreements arise in it. ... Hence it is certain that a total and real absolute unity cannot be hoped for in this life. And therefore not every disagreement at once dissolves church union and the unity in the Church" (*Ibid.*, 101-102).

<sup>13</sup> C.F.W. Walther, “Theses on the Modern Theory of Open Questions, 1868,” *Church Fellowship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 142. Emphasis in original.

<sup>14</sup> C.F.W. Walther, “Foreword to the 1860 Volume of *Lehre und Wehre*,” *Church Fellowship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 70.

<sup>15</sup> C.F.W. Walther, “The True Visible Church,” *Essays for the Church, Volume I* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 143.

*"Brethren, if we had known all this before, we might have been united ten years ago already."*<sup>16</sup> The Missouri Synod recognized accord with the Ohio Synod and **Illinois Synod** in 1870 and 1872, respectively.

32. Humanly speaking, Loy probably deserves the most credit for promoting and pushing for **the founding of the Synodical Conference**, though he actually advocated for organically merging into one church body. The establishment of church fellowship between Wisconsin and Missouri (and their joint pastoral training effort) got the ball rolling very quickly, but the resolution to form the Synodical Conference originated in the Ohio Synod in 1870. **Two organizational meetings** were held in January and November 1871.
33. The Synodical Conference was founded for a variety of reasons, chiefly:
  - a. To preserve and promote confessional Lutheranism
  - b. To train pastors and teachers together more efficiently
  - c. To alleviate competition between rival congregations within close proximity of one another
  - d. To do mission work among the Germans, Norwegians, and English more efficiently
34. It is important to note that not every doctrinal position between the Synodical Conference members would be completely aligned before church fellowship was established. A clear example of this was the Missouri Synod's position on **the charging and paying of interest (usury)**. Walther and the Missourians believed the practice was *clearly and strictly prohibited* by Scripture, but since it is not a "*doctrine concerning the path to eternal life*," Walther stated that he would refuse to "*make it a test question*." Different positions on such doctrinal and practical questions were deemed non-divisive of church fellowship because they were not articles of faith. Naturally, the lowans pounced and accused Walther of conveniently utilizing an open questions principle he had previously condemned. But Walther explained:

*"It is true that we will not permit any clear doctrine of Scripture to be made an 'open question,' be it great or small. But while we regard it necessary to contend to the utmost for every article of faith, upon every one of which our faith and hope depends, to condemn the opposing errors, and to deny stubborn adversaries (hartnäckig Widersprechenden) the hand of brotherly fellowship, we do not, on the other hand, regard it necessary, under all circumstances, to carry on the controversy to its greatest extent as regards doctrines of Scripture (Schriftelehren) which are not articles of faith, much less would we express the sentence of condemnation against the opposing errorists and deny the hand of brotherly fellowship to them, although we reject the error. If in a controversy such doctrines are treated as do not belong to the articles of faith, all depends upon this, whether the adversaries manifest that they oppose it because they will not submit to the Word of God, and thus whether they, although they apparently permit the fundamental doctrines of the Word of God to remain, nevertheless overthrow the foundation itself, the Word of God, upon which all those doctrines rest."*<sup>17</sup>
35. When it came to the situation in the soon-to-be established Synodical Conference, Walther publicly admitted in 1871 that there was not, nor would there ever be, perfect agreement on every teaching of Scripture and application. *"We certainly do not hide from ourselves that in the various synods advocating the 'Synodical Conference' there are still some weaknesses that threaten to disturb the unity, but by God's grace all these synods are on the same right path to the one right goal. They are just as little ashamed to admit their shortcomings as to acknowledge the goal so that they have to repeat: In the same way it will also be accomplished by God, who has promised that he will allow the sincere to succeed—those who allow the truth to succeed—although the doing has to be added to the willing."*<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Peter M. Prange, *Wielding the Sword of the Spirit, Volume Two: The Doctrine and Practice of Church Fellowship in the Synodical Conference, 1868-1877*, (Wauwatosa, Wisconsin: John Ph. Koehler Press, 2022), 159.

<sup>17</sup> C.F.W. Walther, "Mr. XX and the Missouri Synod Once More, For the Last Time," *Der Lutheraner* 27, no. 17 (May 1, 1871), 131.

<sup>18</sup> C.F.W. Walther, "Synodical Conference," *Der Lutheraner* 28, no. 5 (December 1, 1871), 36.

## Conclusion: Biblical Church Fellowship Founded on Fundamental Unity

Longtime Wisconsin Synod professor **John Ph. Meyer** echoed the spirit and words of C.F.W. Walther in a 1944 synod convention essay entitled, “Unionism.” He highlighted the importance of understanding that biblical church fellowship can only be founded on fundamental unity and agreement, since complete agreement in all things is impossible for weak and sinful human beings to achieve. He explained:

*Those are in fundamental agreement who, without any reservation, submit to the Word of God. When the Word of God has spoken in any matter, that matter is settled. There may be things that some men have not yet found in their study of the Bible; there may be matters with reference to which they have accustomed themselves to an inadequate mode of expression; yet, no matter what their deficiency may be, they are determined to accept the Bible doctrine. Where such is the case, there is fundamental agreement. ...*

*A fundamental agreement is all the church can ever hope to attain here on earth. We are not all equally gifted; one has a much clearer and a much more comprehensive insight into God’s doctrine than another. We all strive to grow daily in understanding. Besides, when once we have accustomed ourselves to a faulty or an inadequate expression, it is not only difficult to unlearn the particular phrase and to acquire a proper one, but the inadequate term may tend also to warp our views on other points. Yet, in spite of all such differences, where there is an unconditional willingness to hear what God has to say in his Word, there is fundamental agreement.<sup>19</sup>*

The **Wisconsin Synod’s Theses on Church Fellowship** confess the same principles when, on the one hand, they state: “*A Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God. The denial, adulteration, or suppression of any word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief*” (B.2). But then they immediately explain, “*Actually, however, the faith of Christians and its manifestations are marked by many imperfections, either in the grasp and understanding of scriptural truths, or in the matter of turning these truths to full account in their lives. We are all weak in one way or another*” (B.3). Besides referencing several Bible passages to support these points, Walther’s fifth thesis on open questions is also quoted in the WELS statement in order to summarize what they mean to say. “*The Church militant must indeed aim at and strive for absolute unity of faith and doctrine, but it never will attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one.*”

The founding fathers of the Synodical Conference were very much aware that this unique confessional Lutheran association in America was founded not on complete agreement but fundamental agreement. They rejoiced in the unity of the Spirit they had discovered through the bond of peace (Eph 4:3). In his opening sermon, Walther expressed the wonder and joy that the first delegates must have shared exactly 150 years ago today, **July 10, 1872.**

*Look and see here a multitude of representatives from six church bodies which, only a few years ago, stood opposing one another, as enemies at war—today they praise God and the Father of our LORD JESUS Christ in one spirit with a single voice ... [and gather] to discuss, as fellows in one faith, as sons of one church, and as laborers in one work, in brotherly unity, the means to achieve the single goal that has been placed before them, and that motivates them all as servants and children of one church. O blessed and holy day! Some day even our children and children’s children will recount it with joy.<sup>20</sup>*

May we do just that today and in future days, in thanksgiving to Jesus and to the glory of his eternal saving name!

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<sup>19</sup> John Ph. Meyer, “Unionism,” 63-64.

<sup>20</sup> C.F.W. Walther, “Sermon at the Opening of the First Assembly of the Synodical Conference,” *From Our Master’s Table*, Joel Baseley, trans. (Dearborn, Michigan: Mark V Publications, 2008), 265-269.