

Lutheran Denominations in America



A Comparative Study of ELCA, LCMS & WELS

Session 4: History & Background of the LCMS

Introduction

Share your experience, impressions, or initial thoughts about the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: History

Brief History of the LCMS

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was formed in 1847 in Chicago. Confessional Lutherans from Germany were fleeing doctrinal pressure and political persecution in their homeland, and they immigrated to America to seek religious freedom. Many of them settled in Perry County, Missouri, near St. Louis. C. F. W. Walther served as the first president of the Missouri Synod from 1847–1850 and 1864–1878, as well as the first president of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis from 1850–1887. Walther is known as the “father of American Lutheranism” and “the American Luther.” He was a very strong voice for confessional Lutheranism in the early days of the Missouri Synod. Wilhelm Loehe also sent missionaries from Germany to the area around Michigan, and Frankenmuth was founded as a colony of German Lutherans under August Craemer. Loehe founded a practical¹ seminary in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. In 1847 the Missouri Synod took over this seminary. With seminaries in place, the Missouri Synod quickly grew, reaching about 350,000 members by 1884.

At this time the Missouri Synod was the leading voice for confessional Lutheranism in America. It did not declare fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod until 1868. From the Wisconsin Synod’s founding in 1850 until that year, the Missouri Synod helped encourage the Wisconsin Synod to move to a more solidly confessional position from its less-than-fully confessional position, which was inherited from the German mission societies. The Missouri and Wisconsin Synods helped found the Synodical Conference in 1872. This synodical conference was founded on the basis of full agreement in doctrine and practice, unlike the General Synod in 1820 (to a greater extent) and the General Council in 1867 (to a lesser extent).² For the rest of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods were great partners together in the Synodical Conference with both of them committed to practicing church fellowship on the basis of full doctrinal agreement.

¹ A “practical seminary” requires less time than a traditional seminary, especially by dispensing with the study of the biblical languages.

² The General Synod and General Council were agreements between early Lutheran synods in the East and Midwest, both of which eventually ended up in the ELCA.

This began to change around the 1930s, when the Missouri Synod began to have doctrinal discussions with the (old) American Lutheran Church.³ The ALC did not believe that full agreement on “nonfundamental” doctrines was necessary for fellowship. Although there was no full agreement, the Missouri Synod continued to explore fellowship with the ALC. In 1944, the Missouri Synod’s convention adopted the distinction between “prayer fellowship” and “joint prayer.” In 1947, the Missouri Synod publicly declared that full agreement was needed with the ALC, but during the 1940s and 1950s, there was more joint prayer or cooperation between groups that were not currently in full fellowship. At times, this also involved joint worship, especially in the case of military chaplaincy. During these two decades, the Wisconsin Synod voiced its concern and objections about this gradual change in fellowship principles and practice. At the 1952 Synodical Conference, the Wisconsin Synod declared a formal protest against the Missouri Synod. In 1955 the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) suspended fellowship with the Missouri Synod, followed by the Wisconsin Synod in 1961. In 1963 WELS and ELS withdrew from the Synodical Conference, and it was dissolved in 1967.

By 1974, the president of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, John Tietjen, led a group of professors who were promoting the historical-critical method of interpreting Scripture. The LCMS President, Jacob Preus, worked to address the issue and discipline those professors. On February 19, the majority of the professors and students walked off of campus to form a “seminary in exile”—an event known as Seminex. This group eventually formed the AELC, which then eventually merged to form the ELCA. In 1977 the Missouri Synod no longer allowed members to belong to both the LCMS and AELC, and in 1981 it broke fellowship with the ALC. This was one very rare incidence in church history where a denomination exercised doctrinal discipline over inroads of the historical-critical method.

Quick Facts of the LCMS

- The LCMS is the second largest Lutheran denomination in America, with about 1.8 million members (as of 2021).
- The Missouri Synod is divided into 35 districts.
- The headquarters of the LCMS is in St. Louis.
- Despite its name, there are many more LCMS members in states like Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota than Missouri.
- The current synod president is Matthew Harrison, who was first elected in 2010. He holds two masters degrees and an honorary doctorate from Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. Matthew Harrison is known as a strong confessional voice in the Missouri Synod currently. Since 2012, the LCMS has participated in informal discussions with WELS/ELS.
- The Missouri Synod operates the Concordia University system, which has six/seven campuses across America (the Ann Arbor campus merged with the Mequon, WI, campus in 2013).
- The two LCMS seminaries are located in St. Louis and Ft. Wayne.
- The LCMS is a member of the International Lutheran Council (ILC), an international association of 54 confessional Lutheran churches (as of 2018).
- The publishing house of the LCMS is Concordia Publishing House (CPH) in St. Louis.

³ The “old” American Lutheran Church was founded in 1930, which is distinguished from the American Lutheran Church founded in 1960, which was one of the predecessor denominations of the ELCA.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: Background

The background of the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods revolves around the doctrine of fellowship. This was the main historical reason for the split between the two synods. Other doctrinal differences are present today (see next session), but this is arguably the main difference between the two.

Contrast the following quote, “Relationships with Other Christian Churches,” from the ecumenical approach in the ELCA (see last sessions):

Although this spiritual unity (the unity of the Church) is a present reality, external unity (unity in the Church) most certainly is not. Already in the New Testament, Jesus warned His disciples about those who would “lead many astray” with their false teachings (Matthew 24:5). St. Paul in his letters warned his readers to be on guard against “false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:13). He also warned against sinful divisions (1 Corinthians 1:11-12), admonishing the Corinthians “that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10). Seeking to be faithful to what the Scriptures teach about both the unity of the Church and unity in the Church, the Lutheran Confessions hold that the way to achieve external unity in the Church is to confess the truth and to expose error. “For thorough, permanent unity in the Church, it is necessary, above all things, that we have a comprehensive, unanimously approved summary and form of teaching. The common doctrine must be brought together from God's Word” (Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Rule and Norm, 1).

The LCMS seeks to be faithful to what the Bible says about the spiritual unity of the Church and external unity in the Church as it relates to other Lutherans and to other Christian Churches. On the one hand, we believe that divisions in Christendom ultimately stem from sin and are contrary to God's will. Therefore, the first objective of the Synod sets forth the goal of working “through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies” and of providing “a united defense against schism, sectarianism (Rom. 16:17), and heresy” (LCMS Constitution, Article III, 1). As one way of striving toward this objective, the Missouri Synod has taken part in all of the Lutheran bilateral dialogues held in the United States to this date, beginning with the Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue in 1965, and including official discussions with the Orthodox, Reformed Churches, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, and conservative Evangelicals.

At the same time, we as LCMS Lutherans teach that the way to external unity in the Church is by confronting differences in doctrine and resolving these differences, not by ignoring them or by agreeing to disagree. We believe that, according to Scripture, external unity in the Church is a matter of right confession of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We therefore hold that church fellowship or merger between church bodies in doctrinal disagreement with one another is not in keeping with what the Bible teaches about church fellowship. For this reason, the LCMS representatives to the third round of discussions between Lutherans and Episcopalians in the U.S.A., as well as to the discussions between Lutherans and Reformed church bodies, did not join in with ELCA representatives in recommending full altar and pulpit fellowship with these churches. We believe that genuine unity in the confession of the

Christian faith exists only where there is agreement in the confession of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all its articles.⁴

The quote above speaks of “altar and pulpit fellowship.” Altar and pulpit fellowship refers to participating in the Lord’s Supper and pastors exchanging pulpits only with people of the same fellowship. In the past, the LCMS spoke of “levels of fellowship”—you could have various degrees of fellowship depending on how much you agreed in doctrine—but now this view is not expressed by their representatives. However, the Missouri Synod is often unclear or inconsistent with what fellowship should be like in areas other than altar and pulpit fellowship.⁵

Read Romans 16:17, which has been historically been a very important passage in the doctrine of fellowship. **Explain** why God wants complete doctrinal unity before a church practices fellowship. **Discuss the thorny details.** What does it mean to “keep away from them”? In other words, which of the following areas does the doctrine of fellowship apply?

1. Participate in a worship service
2. Preach in each other’s pulpits
3. Take the Lord’s Supper together
4. Pray together
5. Being a musician who is a part of leading the worship service
6. Contribute to humanitarian aid efforts in each other’s mission fields
7. Contribute to humanitarian aid efforts in secular organizations
8. Teach theology at each other’s schools
9. Teach non-theological subjects at each other’s schools
10. Attend free conferences
11. Have informal religious conversations about each other’s beliefs
12. Interact with each other at the grocery store

As mentioned above, the Missouri Synod has distinguished between “prayer fellowship” and “joint prayer.” **Evaluate this distinction** in light of the events surrounding the prayer service at Yankee Stadium on September 23, 2001.

Background: After 9/11, thousands of people gathered in New York City for “A Prayer for America.” Some of the service was civically focused, but most of the service involved various prayers from various religious representatives, including Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, and Hindu leaders, as well as many Christian leaders of various Christian denominations. David Benke, president of the Atlantic District of the LCMS, participated. This was very controversial in the LCMS. Benke was suspended by the LCMS second vice president, Wallace Schulz, but then was reinstated through an appeals panel.

⁴ “An Introduction to the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,” Concordia Tracts, Concordia Publishing House, 13–14, accessed from cph.org.

⁵ Bill Tackmier, “The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Today: One Man’s Perspective,” paper presented at the Northern Michigan Pastoral Conference, 5 October 2021, 10. Tackmier received his PhD from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and has been a WELS representative at the informal talks with the LCMS.

The LCMS president at the time, Gerald Kieschnick, wrote this statement:

President Benke contacted me twice about the event prior to his participation. I did and do support the pastoral decision he made to participate. His action in doing so is clearly in line with a document entitled “The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship: A Report on Synodical Discussions.” ... This document reads, in part: “Not every occasion where worship takes place is necessarily a manifestation of church fellowship.”

Schulz’ response to Benke’s reinstatement:

Even though this case involves a very serious offense against God’s First Commandment and must therefore be dealt with on the basis of God’s Word, the Panel has decided to rule on the basis of a man-made resolution! ... In its decision the Panel has clearly violated the Constitution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and sinned against the Word of God, since Article VIII of the LCMS Constitution states all matters of doctrine and conscience shall be decided only by the Word of God.⁶

Conclusion

The split between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods was a difficult day for many people. **Respond:** “The doctrine of fellowship fusses about minor details that don’t matter that much. There’s not that much difference between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods.”

⁶ Quoted in John Brug, *WELS and Other Lutherans*, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2009), 32–36.