

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

Fellowship and Communion in the Postmodern Era: The Case of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

David L. Carlson

Pp 263 – 293 in Roozen and Nieman (eds), *Church, Identity and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times* (Eerdmans, 2005). Also in *Church, Identity and Change*: “Structuring A Confessional Church for the Global Age: Admission to Communion by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod” by Paul Marschke and “The Theological Meaning and Use of Communion: The Case of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod” by Eugene W. Bunkowske.

Resources from the *Organizing Religious Work Project* of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research
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CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman

Hartford Institute for Religion Research
Hartford Seminary
hrr@hartsem.edu

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Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
255 Jefferson Ave. S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503 /
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.

Printed in the United States of America

10 09 08 07 06 05 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Church, identity, and change: theology and denominational structures in unsettled times /
edited by David A. Roozen & James Nieman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8028-2819-1 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Protestant churches — United States — History. 2. Protestant churches —
Doctrines — History. 3. United States — Church history.

I. Roozen, David A. II. Nieman, James R., 1956-

BR515.C526 2005

280'.4'0973 — dc22

2004060785

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Fellowship and Communion in the Postmodern Era: The Case of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod

David L. Carlson

In the summer of 1834 a young German theologian arrived in Baltimore. Having completed his university education, Friedrich C. D. Wyneken had arrived in North America to minister to German Lutheran immigrants. Shortly after his arrival, Wyneken wandered into a revival meeting. Asked how he liked it, Wyneken is said to have replied: “Whether it is of God or of the devil, I don’t know, but it certainly is not Lutheran.”¹

Fellowship and Communion in the Missouri Synod

Wyneken had an understanding of what it meant to be Lutheran, and evangelical revivalism didn’t fit that understanding. Wyneken’s response and his subsequent ministry clearly indicate that he did not view the participants in that revival meeting as being in fellowship with the body of believers who called themselves Lutheran. To understand his response, we need some understanding of the place of revivalism in American Christianity, but more importantly, we need to understand Wyneken’s understanding of what it meant to be Lutheran. Now, at the turn of a new century, it is helpful to ask if the way in which Wyneken and other early Lutheran pioneers understood fellowship is still ap-

1. Erich H. Heintzen, *Prairie School of the Prophets: The Anatomy of a Seminary, 1846-1976* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1989), p. 18.

The author thanks the Lilly Foundation for underwriting this research and the Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford Seminary for coordinating the Organizing Religious Work project. I am indebted to Eugene Bunkowske, Paul Marschke, John Kayser, and especially Ken Schurb for their helpful comments.

propriate. Is it still clear that contemporary evangelicals are not in fellowship with the contemporary body of confessional Lutherans?²

Different understandings of what it means to be in fellowship are central to a current conflict within the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LC-MS), one of the two largest synods of Lutherans in America.³ While differing understandings of fellowship are exhibited in many forms, this case study examines a judicatory challenge to the historical definition of fellowship posed by one of the districts of this body and the reaction of the central judicatory authority to this challenge. The issue is communion, and the conflict is over who ought properly be invited to share the sacrament.

2. Contemporary revivalism is closely allied with evangelicalism. The current revivalistic movement is viewed in this paper, in part, as a response to postmodern relativism. Timothy George, a senior editor of *Christianity Today*, defines modern evangelicalism this way: “Seen historically, evangelicalism is a renewal movement within historic Christian orthodoxy. Its theology and piety have been enriched by many diverse tributaries, including Puritanism, pietism, and Pentecostalism, but its sense of identity as a distinctive faith community, what we might call the evangelical tradition, has been shaped decisively by three major episodes: the Protestant Reformation, the Evangelical Awakening, and the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy” (“If I’m an Evangelical, What Am I?” *Christianity Today*, August 9, 1999, p. 62). I am persuaded that a fourth element is instrumental to contemporary evangelical revival. The emergence of relativism, as a dominant cultural force at the close of the century, has spawned a counterreaction that has coalesced around modern evangelicalism. This counterreaction is manifested as a renewed emphasis on biblical inerrancy as an alternative to relativism. In this renewed emphasis on biblical inerrancy, confessional Lutherans and modern evangelicals have found common ground.

3. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is the other. The LC-MS for the past 150 years has understood itself to be the more representative synod of confessional Lutheranism in America. While all Lutheran synods are confessional in the sense that they trace their identity to the historic confessions of the sixteenth century, the LC-MS emerged as a self-conscious coalition of Lutherans whose primary mission was the preservation of these confessions. The antecedent synods of the ELCA generally acknowledged this as Missouri’s primary mission, and referencing the LC-MS as the primary defender of orthodoxy (often described pejoratively as “dead orthodoxy”), were more likely to define their mission evangelically.

As used in this paper, “confessional” denotes an emphasis that has divided American Lutherans since early in the nineteenth century. “Confessional” denotes a repristination emphasis on adherence to the sixteenth-century symbols of the Reformation. Particular emphasis is given to the Augsburg Confession and Luther’s *Small Catechism*, but Missouri Lutheranism also references Luther’s *Large Catechism*, the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, and the Formula of Concord as the confessional symbols of historic Lutheranism. Lutheranism in America has often divided on the issue of the sufficiency of the sixteenth-century symbols. “Confessional Lutheranism” in this sense denotes a more conservative orientation that defends the sufficiency of these symbols as opposed to others who view the historic confessions as more advisory and less binding.

Fellowship and Denominational Affiliation

At its triennial convention in 1997, the Florida-Georgia District of the LC-MS adopted a resolution which recommended that district pastors and congregations welcome to the Lord's Table all individuals who, *regardless of denominational affiliation*, shared the confession of the Eucharist articulated in the historic confessions of the Lutheran church. This resolution was predicated on a position paper produced by the Committee for a Declaration of Eucharistic Understanding and Practice, a group of pastors within the district who had organized to challenge the historical LC-MS practice of "close (or closed)" communion. The following summer, at its 1998 convention, the national governing body of the LC-MS declared that the rationale utilized by the committee to support the resolution was inappropriate. Finding the committee's rationale and the resulting district resolution contrary to synodical resolutions, the delegates to the synodical convention declared the Florida-Georgia resolution "null and void."

This conflict reflects a division within the synodical membership that has multiple implications but one central question: What does it mean to be in fellowship? This case study examines the organizational structure of the LC-MS through the window of this question, and the related issue of how the LC-MS might resolve the issue of who ought to be invited to the communion table.

Fellowship: Categorical Membership versus Collective Conscience

The word "fellowship" means different things to different people. It is a term commonly used in LC-MS polity. Historically, LC-MS directives define fellowship in reference to the body of believers who embrace confessional Lutheranism. More specifically, when used in this context, fellowship generally refers to incorporated bodies of believers. Thus, the LC-MS officially recognizes a number of organized church bodies which are deemed to be in fellowship with the synod. In this sense fellowship is defined categorically. Confessional Lutheranism has been understood by the LC-MS to be a fellowship of believers who have organized to extend the legacy of the Reformation. Fellowship, therefore, is the body of believers who embrace the full exposition of the faith as defined by the sixteenth-century Reformers. More specifically, fellowship implies submission to and conformity with a comprehensive exposition of the Lutheran Confessions. Membership in a congregation affiliated with the LC-MS, or with another organization similarly committed to the preservation of the confessions,

has historically been defined as the necessary condition to be considered “in fellowship.” Being in fellowship, as so defined, has been viewed as a necessary precondition for participation in the Eucharist. This is the policy of close(d) communion.

It is the above definition of fellowship that is challenged by the Committee for a Declaration of Eucharistic Understanding and Practice’s rejection of it as a precondition for sharing in the sacrament. In the process, the committee redefined what it means to be in fellowship, replacing denominational affiliation with a personal understanding of the sacrament as the appropriate criterion for participation in the sacrament.

In rejecting categorical membership as a necessary condition for participation in the sacrament, the committee has in principle redefined fellowship to include all believers who believe they agree with the Lutheran understanding of the sacrament. While retaining the historically Lutheran understanding of the sacrament, the committee’s criterion accentuates personal autonomy and subjective association as the primary criterion for fellowship.

It is these differing understandings of fellowship that are at the center of the conflict over communion policy, a policy which historically the LC-MS has called “close (or closed)⁴ communion.” Using a more individualized and subjective understanding of fellowship, the views of a new generation of Lutherans conflict with a more traditional view of fellowship.

To set the stage for examining this conflict, we need to look at how the LC-MS arrived at its policy of close(d) communion, and to understand this we need to return to 1834.

The Emergence of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod

Friedrich C. D. Wyneken would emerge as a key architect of confessional Lutheranism in America.⁵ He along with other nineteenth-century German pi-

4. The current conflict over communion is reflected in disagreement as to the proper terminology to describe existing policy. Is the existing LC-MS policy one of “close communion” or of “closed communion”? “Close communion” accentuates commonality of agreement with the historical Lutheran doctrinal understanding of the Lord’s Supper. “Closed communion” accentuates exclusivity. While the terms are not mutually exclusive, each implies a different emphasis. The former is more subjective, the latter is more categorical. In this sense this contested ground is reflective of the conflict addressed in this paper.

5. “Confessional Lutheranism” is understood here as a doctrinal orientation that embraces the historic confessions of the Reformation church as the foundation for contemporary church polity. Article II of the Confession Constitution of the LC-MS states that

oneers, especially C. F. W. Walther and Wilhelm Sihler, would create a church that would become the LC-MS. For these men, emigrants primarily from Saxony and Prussia, America represented the best, and perhaps the last, hope of preserving confessional Lutheranism. Wyneken and his colleagues had departed a Europe where the Lutheran Confessions were enduring a frontal assault by the state. For these German pioneers, far more was at stake than simply ministering to emigrants to the New World. The foundations of the church itself were under attack.⁶

The emigration was in response to the coerced union of Reformed and Lutheran Christians in Germany into a single state-established church.⁷ This unionized church was more Reformed than Lutheran, and the governments of

The Synod, and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation:

1. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice;
2. All the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God, to wit: the three Ecumenical Creeds (the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed), the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Large Catechism of Luther, the Small Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord.

6. Writing to an American missionary in 1844, Loehe provided this instruction: "A German Lutheran Candidate for the ministry who, like you, is ordained under the circumstances prevailing in North America recognizes the full importance of the German Language for the German faith, if we, without being misunderstood, can call the faith of the Evangelical Lutheran Church German. Therefore you will conclude no union with congregations which would allow room for English in the office of the ministry and in instruction. Over there German language and customs are the vanguard of the Evangelical Lutheran faith" (August R. Suelflow, "Beginnings of 'Missouri, Ohio, and Other States,'" in *Moving Frontiers: Readings in the History of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, ed. Carl S. Meyer [St. Louis: Concordia, 1964], p. 99).

7. Friedrich Wilhelm III, the Prussian monarch, was a Calvinist, but he governed a people who were largely Lutheran. In an attempt to reconcile the confessional differences between himself and his people, Wilhelm ordered the creation of the United Evangelical Church in 1830. The confessional practice of this unionized church largely reflected the influence of rationalist and idealist principles. In 1830 German nationhood was still emerging from the medieval alliance of Germanic principalities. Prussia was the largest and most powerful of these principalities, and the combined threat of Wilhelm and Napoleon was rapidly fusing a new sense of German nationhood. Thus, rationalism and idealism were largely associated with the Napoleonic Wars and the French Revolution. Emergent German identity embraced the Reformation as the primary German contribution to Western civilization. The Reformation was elevated to the level of a national myth, and Luther was embraced as the principal German hero. A renewed interest in Luther's theology and a desire to preserve this idealized German culture largely motivated Wyneken's, and his cohorts', emigration to the United States (Robert C. Schultz, "The European Background," in *Moving Frontiers*, pp. 55-61).

Prussia and Saxony had denied requests from Lutheran pastors to establish an alternative church. The Lutheran pioneers who would establish the LC-MS came to America to preserve a faith they could not preserve in Germany. Their circumstance was not unlike that of the faithful during the Babylonian exile, and like the Israelites, they would seek to preserve a culture that nourished the faith in the midst of a foreign culture. To understand contemporary conflict within the LC-MS, it is necessary to understand the context from which these early pioneers emerged and the conditions they faced on the American frontier in the early nineteenth century. They brought with them a deep suspicion of emergent church forms and a powerful sense of a German Lutheran identity. This suspicion of religious “unionism” and an accompanying sense of exclusive fellowship have stamped the character of the LC-MS to this day.⁸

The Europe Wyneken had left behind, when he arrived in Baltimore in 1834, was one that knew only established religion. The established church in Germany was more Calvinist than Lutheran, and Wyneken’s primary concern was to establish a church in America grounded on the historical confessions of the Reformation. Another way of saying this is that Wyneken’s primary intention was to preserve Lutheran fellowship. Fellowship, as he understood it, was both ethnically German and doctrinally Lutheran. Opposition to revivalism per se was not his central concern. He was far more concerned with establishing a church committed to the preservation of the historical Lutheran Confessions than he was with entering into dialogue with evangelicals to resolve doctrinal issues. The Lutheran church Wyneken found when he arrived in America exhibited, for him, too many of the same rationalistic elements German Lutherans had come to associate with Enlightenment thought and Reformed theology. Wyneken wanted to create a church where none of these existed.

Understanding the juxtaposition of German nationalism and Lutheran doctrine, in the creation of this church, is central to understanding the way Wyneken and the other LC-MS pioneers envisioned fellowship. Wyneken, as would Walther and Sihler, championed throughout his life the need to preserve German as the language of discourse within the Lutheran church. Their justification for doing this was the inadequacy of English translations of the liturgy, but these pioneers viewed that which was truly Lutheran as essentially German. For these men fellowship was closely linked to ethnicity. Later Missouri Lutherans might grant fellowship to non-Germans, but they retained the sense that

8. The term “unionism” is part of the LC-MS lexicon. As used in the LC-MS, the term originated in reference to the creation of the United Evangelical Church of Prussia, commonly called the Prussian Union. The term is now commonly used to indicate any form of ecumenical cooperation with church bodies not officially recognized as being in fellowship with the LC-MS.

fellowship was categorical. With time, the understanding of fellowship was transformed, although never entirely, from being German to being LC-MS.

Shortly after Wyneken's arrival in America, a cadre of Lutheran clergy would respond to his lead and follow him from Germany to North America. They came to shepherd the growing flock of immigrants, who on the western frontier were often lured from their Lutheran heritage by itinerant evangelicalism, at this time primarily in the form of Methodism. Accordingly, upon arriving in America, Wyneken began an urgent appeal to the church in his homeland to send these missionaries. Wilhelm Loehle would hear of Wyneken's appeal in Bavaria and dedicate his life to recruiting and equipping missionaries for the American frontier. One of these missionaries was Wilhelm Sihler. Over the next several decades Wyneken, Loehle, and Sihler would build a body of believers in North America that would eventually be organized as the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod.

In Europe the enemy of confessional Lutheranism had been the state. The German Lutheran pioneers faced no such obstacle in America. As they began to build their church on the American frontier, they encountered a new enemy. Roving evangelists were stealing the scattered sheep. The German Lutheran immigrant farmers and tradesmen on the frontier were, in the absence of the "true" church, being gathered by sectarian circuit riders. If we view the Methodist campaign on the western frontier as the nineteenth-century corollary of modern evangelicalism, it can be argued that the LC-MS, to a large degree, emerged as an organized attempt to advance historical confessional Lutheranism in the face of evangelical sectarianism.

The LC-MS emerged out of a desire to preserve and advance a North American church dedicated to preserving the doctrines articulated by the sixteenth-century Lutheran reformers. While the nineteenth-century German Lutheran pioneers viewed evangelical Methodism as the primary opponent to confessional Lutheranism, we must raise the question of the degree to which their opposition to the Methodists was driven by opposition to evangelical worship, and the degree to which it was driven by distrust of a church that was both English and sectarian. This is not to say that worship forms were unimportant to nineteenth-century Lutherans. On the contrary, they were central to Lutheran identity. But Lutheran liturgical forms would emerge as a way of distinguishing the German Lutheran church from its sectarian rivals. This point is key in understanding the current conflict within the LC-MS. It matters whether communion practice emerged as part of liturgical practice intended to demarcate German Lutheran ethnic identity, or whether traditional communion practice is central to the Lutheran confessional understanding of the sacrament.

Contemporary conflict in the LC-MS is now, to a large degree, a conflict

between evangelical and traditional advocates within the church.⁹ The LC-MS emerged in a context of sectarian conflict that threatened the very existence of confessional Lutheranism.¹⁰ The LC-MS pioneers, understandably, were militant in defending close fellowship. But for better or worse, the historical context from which the LC-MS emerged has ever since encouraged a culture within the synod that is suspicious of unionism and inclined toward exclusion. Fellowship is not easily granted in the LC-MS, and the conditions for recognizing fellowship have ever since reflected the pioneers' errand on the American frontier.

The motivation of these pioneers is beyond reproach. Their singular errand was to preserve the historic confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and to preserve the legacy of the Reformation. We have no cause to question their motivations, and still less to suggest that their religious zealotry was a cover for jingoism. But for these pioneers Evangelical Lutheranism was

9. While this paper will focus on the purported conflict between modern evangelicalism and historic confessional Lutheranism, the current conflict is being played out in the wake of another conflict. That conflict, which led to a split of the synod in the 1970s, was also over the understanding of confessional Lutheranism and focused on the proper Lutheran understanding of biblical inerrancy. Principals to that dispute differ as to whether those who departed the synod or those who remained were the true representatives of confessional Lutheranism. I will have more to say about this later. While this paper will focus on the impact of modern evangelicalism on the application of the historic Lutheran understanding of the Sacrament of the Altar, this conflict could as well be viewed as an extension of the earlier conflict. That dispute, as well as this, is about disagreement over the meaning of the Lutheran Confessions. At no point should it be forgotten that the communion table is an important battle, but in a much larger war.

10. In the nineteenth century the Lutheran reaction to Methodism was largely articulated as rejection of sectarianism, which is to say, of sectarianism per se. How and to what degree the German Lutheran pioneers were particularly offended by Methodist doctrine is not clear and not particularly important. The LC-MS emerged through the efforts of people who had no concept of anything other than a nationally established church. For these people the Lutheran church was a German church. The pioneers of the LC-MS insisted that German be the language of discourse in the church because, they said, there was no adequate translation of the liturgy available in English. This was probably true, but the preservation of a German Lutheran church was far more than a utilitarian attempt to preserve the best available translations of the liturgy. German identity was at the heart of the emergent church. The Methodists were, of course, largely English. But there is reason to doubt that the conflict with the Methodists was primarily a reflection of doctrinal disagreements. Paul Marschke has observed that there was no similar reaction to the Anglican/Episcopalian church, and offers the suggestion that nineteenth-century German Lutherans were comfortable with the idea of an established English church. The Methodist church was never established. In addition, the Methodists were making converts among German immigrants. One must question to what degree the hostility to frontier Methodism was discomfort with evangelical Christianity per se, and to what degree it was a reaction to sectarianism.

the "German faith," and English transformations were likely vehicles for creeping unionism. They had seen how the erosive tendencies of American Lutheranism had impacted an earlier generation of German immigrants and compromised the integrity of the historic confessions. The LC-MS was born in the midst of an assault which came from two directions. From behind, they were under attack from a church-state alliance in Europe that would replace the historical confessions with Reformed doctrine. At the front, they encountered an alliance of English sectarianism and rationalistic Lutheranism in America. It would be a mistake to minimize the climate of siege, and the resulting sense of urgency to preserve confessional Lutheranism, from which the LC-MS emerged.

Heritage and Ethnicity

The current conflict over who should be invited to the communion table centers, as it always has, on the issue of fellowship. LC-MS fellowship in the nineteenth century was largely ethnic in nature. We are using a concept of ethnicity here that is defined not so much by nationalism as by common identity. "Ethnicity," as used here, refers to the tendency of people in modern societies to define themselves in reference to pools of role opposites when faced with the impersonality of mass society. Andrew Greeley has pointed out that European immigrants embraced religious identity in America because it was a meaningful way of differentiating themselves and thereby establishing their own identity.¹¹ Given the inexorable connection between ethnicity and religion in Europe, embracing one's religious identity was not instrumental to European identity. But it was in America, and while American denominationalism emerged as surrogate to national identity, denominationalism per se tended with time to become the principal measure of ethnicity.

For the LC-MS pioneers, ethnicity was both German and Lutheran. The singular task of the leaders of the first generation of Missouri Lutherans would be to establish a church that would preserve confessional Lutheranism. They were a community of people dedicated to the preservation of *Reine Lehre* (pure doctrine). This, and this alone, defined who they were. This task differentiated them not only from English sectarians but also from an earlier generation of German Lutherans who, from their perspective, had sullied the historical confessions through compromise with Americanisms.

11. Andrew M. Greeley, *The Denominational Society* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1972), chap. 5, "Religion as an Ethnic Phenomenon."

For the first generations of Missouri Synod Lutherans there was little distinction between being Lutheran and being German. The identification of later generations of Lutherans with German heritage tended to inexorably wane, but their identification with confessional Lutheranism held firm. The result was that being Lutheran, rather than being German, increasingly defined who they were. And being a Missouri Synod Lutheran meant not only being dedicated to the preservation of the historic confessions, but embracing a linkage to the historic defenders of the faith. German heritage still remains a nostalgic point of reference for many contemporary Lutherans, but it is dedication to *Reine Lehre* that defines them. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, many in the LC-MS, identifying with long family histories, continue to feel a deep connection to this ethnic heritage. This is a heritage which originated in and continues a singular mission to preserve that which is uniquely Lutheran. This is the heritage which spawned and continues to champion close(d) communion. For these Lutherans fellowship is reserved to those who are similarly dedicated.

A growing body of people within the LC-MS have an agenda that is less bound to this heritage. In our highly individualistic age, for another large and emerging segment of the LC-MS fellowship is not understood in this way. For this emergent group, being Lutheran is no less important, but being LC-MS is not their primary identity. For them Lutheranism is more ontological than categorical. To be Lutheran means to emphasize an understanding of Scripture that is differentiated from that which is Reformed, Arminian, or Roman Catholic. On the surface there is no contradiction between ontological Lutheranism and historical Lutheranism; the traditionalists generally embrace the same ontological distinction. It is emphasis that divides. For Lutherans more oriented to postmodernism, faith is more abstract. They emphasize the invisible church and reflect the postmodern inclination to be suspicious of organizations. Fellowship for those of a more postmodern bent is defined within the contours of the invisible church, and those who are viewed as having a common understanding are viewed as being in fellowship — regardless of denominational affiliation. To understand the current conflict in the church, we need to examine this more postmodern understanding of what it means to be Lutheran as well. But before proceeding to this, it would be well to tell the rest of the story of how the LC-MS emerged.

Polity within the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

If the cultural climate of the LC-MS was shaped on the frontier of Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan by the Wyneken/Loehe/Sihler vision, we must look farther

west to find the context from which the polity of the church emerged. To anticipate how the current conflict over communion fellowship will be resolved, we need now to turn to this context.

From its earliest years Lutheranism in America has been divided between those who would more deliberately maintain a church organization dedicated to the preservation of the Lutheran Confessions, substantively articulated during the Reformation, and those who would construct a uniquely American Lutheran church. Advocates of "American Lutheranism" differed from the advocates of "confessional Lutheranism" in their attitude toward Luther's role in the Reformation.¹² The former considered themselves nineteenth-century reformers who believed the Reformation was a work in process, while the latter were more inclined to view the doctrinal position of Luther as final and authoritative.

American Lutherans and confessional Lutherans have created church structures that reflect their differing orientations toward the role of the church in addressing culture and in preserving doctrine. Historically, the advocates of American Lutheranism were more likely to be earlier immigrants, more likely to be concentrated in the East, and more directly influenced by the social, political, cultural, and economic currents in the United States. Confessional Lutherans were more likely to be later immigrants, and while there were confessional Lutherans among Scandinavian immigrants, the pioneering founders of the LC-MS were almost exclusively German. While the Wyneken/Sihler/Loeche men and their emergent congregations would provide the largest body of believers in the establishment of the LC-MS, it was a smaller group of Saxon immigrants associated with C. F. W. Walther who would be the architects of the organizational structure of the synod.¹³

The history of the Saxon Lutherans, who emigrated to Missouri in 1839, is central to the emergence of the organizational structure of the LC-MS. This group had essentially been driven out of Germany because of increasing opposition to their leader, Martin Stephan, and also because they opposed the established union of a combined Reformed and Lutheran church. As such, like the Wyneken/Sihler/Loeche men, they were already predisposed to organize a church structure in America that would emphasize doctrine that was uniquely Lutheran. Paradoxically, however, these Saxon Lutherans had formed a church in Germany that closely resembled what Max Weber describes as a charismatic sect, a body bound together by the dominating personality of its leader.

12. Jack T. Robinson, "The Spirit of Triumphalism in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: The Role of the 'A Statement' of 1945 in the Missouri Synod" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1972), pp. 10-19.

13. See Earnest T. Bachmann, "The Rise of 'Missouri Lutheranism'" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1946).

The Saxons' charismatic leader, Martin Stephan,¹⁴ had assembled a group that was fiercely loyal to him. Before their arrival in America, the leaders of this group had extended jurisdictional power to Stephan that was not only dictatorial in essence, but which challenged the foundational Lutheran understanding of the priesthood of all believers. This "Declaration of Submission" delegated virtually all authority, both temporal and doctrinal, to Stephan and was signed by all the adult members of the group.¹⁵

Shortly after the Saxons arrived in Missouri, Stephan was deposed for sexual immorality and financial malfeasance, leaving his flock in a condition of disarray. Stephan had surrounded himself with an inner circle of devoted young clergy and theological students, and in the wake of his demise the people turned their anger toward this inner circle. This circumstance left the laity with a profound distrust of the clergy and an equal distrust of clerical attempts to centralize their authority.

Stephan had attracted a lay following that, while largely rural, included some who were well educated. These lay members of the Saxon immigrants also enjoyed some degree of theological sophistication, and in the wake of Stephan's (and his disciples') humiliation they challenged the essential authority of the clergy.

In the belief that the remaining clergy had forfeited their calling by resigning their parishes in Germany and that therefore no church existed among the Missouri Lutherans, a leader of the laity, Carl Eduard Vehse, drew up six "Theses on the Church" in which he proposed a radical form of congregationalism. Vehse, an attorney, exhibited significant theological understanding which left the young clergy, of whom Walther was the youngest, bewildered.

14. Stephan's ministry had attracted a wide following in Saxony. According to Bachmann, Stephan's preaching emphasized two doctrines: the doctrine of the atonement and the doctrine of the ministry. There can be little doubt that it was the first of these that gained him his following. Stephan preached in what Bachmann describes as an anomalous ecclesiastical environment characterized by a "Roman Catholic ruling house, a Lutheran established church, and a cultivated spirit of compromise or indifferentism rooted in the Enlightenment" ("The Rise," p. 88), and his message of God's transcendence via the atonement fell on fertile ground. Walther, for example, when advised by one of his teachers to be wary of Stephan, is said to have responded: "Shall I desert a man who, by God's grace, has saved my soul?" (p. 84). Giving Stephan his due, having communicated the gospel to a wide following, it was his second doctrinal emphasis that was to be remembered as his legacy to the LC-MS. "Stephan asserted that the ministry is the visible embodiment of the Word of God. With the times being confused to the lay mind, he invited his followers to have complete confidence in his counsel and guidance" (p. 87). The reaction to this doctrinal emphasis, following Stephan's humiliation in Missouri, would leave the LC-MS with its congregational polity and an institutionalized suspicion of an ecclesiastical hierarchy.

15. Bachmann, "The Rise," p. 102.

Walther retreated to examine Vehse's argument. Relying on his own biblical understanding and Luther's apologetics, Walther concluded that Vehse was essentially correct, but that Vehse, reflecting a lawyer's tendency to exaggerate an argument for effect, had understated the role of the pastor in providing leadership to a congregation,¹⁶ particularly his role in maintaining the spiritual and doctrinal integrity of the body.

Preparing a counterargument presented in a dramatic public debate in Altenburg, Missouri, in April 1841, Walther won the day. The outcome was a carefully crafted description of the church emphasizing Luther's distinction between the visible and invisible church. Walther's description of the church would become the model for the organizational structure of the LC-MS.¹⁷

The impact of Walther's triumph on the subsequent structure of confessional Lutheranism in America can hardly be overstated. Having no European precedent for a congregational Lutheran church, Walther's description of the church would become the model for confessional Lutheranism in America. Wyneken and Sihler would embrace Walther's understanding of the church and provide the critical mass for the creation of the LC-MS.

Walther's understanding has two important implications for the current case study. First, the original constitution of Trinity Lutheran Church, St. Louis (Walther's church), would become the model of organization for the LC-MS. In that document it is acknowledged first that "[F]inal authority was vested in the congregation as a whole, for . . . whatever is done or decided by an individual or smaller body on the basis of duly delegated authority can always be brought before the congregation as the supreme court for final decision."¹⁸

But a proviso was added that, for our purposes, provides a second important distinction in understanding the LC-MS position on congregational authority: "[T]he congregation has no right to make regulations or to decide anything contrary to God's Word and to the symbols of the pure Evangelical Lutheran Church. . . . Should the congregation do this, then all such regulations are null and void."¹⁹ Given that the pastor, by virtue of his training, is in the best position to determine when congregational actions are or are not consistent with God's Word, the clergy has *de facto* authority to direct congregational initiatives, even while the congregation retains *de jure* authority to regulate its own affairs.

Organizationally, the Missouri Synod retained the right, via its seminar-

16. Bachmann, "The Rise," p. 102.

17. Bachmann, "The Rise," pp. 135-36.

18. Bachmann, "The Rise," p. 145.

19. Bachmann, "The Rise," p. 145.

ies, to authorize ministerial candidates for ordination. And thus the synod, via its capacity to monitor clergy, effectively maintained considerable authority to regulate congregational initiatives. It need be noted, however, that such authority was, and is, indirect. This is to say that the synod maintains considerable authority to monitor the activity of clergy, who in turn have considerable authority to monitor congregational initiatives, but the synod has no direct authority, short of suspension or expulsion, to sanction congregations.

These two circumstances, what might be described as a unique ecclesiastical congregational political structure and a historical legacy of confessional Lutheranism, have produced an organizational climate in LC-MS polity which more or less always paints political issues in doctrinal language. Such language tends to provide a dramatic and often emotional edge to LC-MS politics.

Given that the synod has no direct authority to regulate the affairs of congregations, church doctrine is maintained by the persuasive power of the ordained ministry. LC-MS pastors maintain considerable prestige, both by virtue of their extensive theological instruction and by a historical legacy reflecting the heritage of the Reformation and the German Evangelical Lutheran Church. The German church provided pastors with extensive jurisdictional power, maintained within a cultural context that encouraged lay subordination to authority. An important question, raised by the current case study, is the degree to which this legacy of pastoral prestige and its connection to synodical authority is still recognized by an increasingly urbanized and cosmopolitan LC-MS laity.

Another way of framing this issue is to note that the authority of the synod is largely maintained via trust. Given no formal bureaucratic authority to directly oversee the affairs of congregations, the synod exercises authority primarily through the office of pastor. This authority is extended via the synod's seminaries and an educational system that includes elementary and secondary schools as well as a nationwide university network. This educational system, second in size only to the Roman Catholic system, is commonly referred to as "the System" by church members. The System, at the university and seminary level, is a hierarchy which is owned and operated by the synod, and is jealously guarded by the leadership of the national church.

Elementary and secondary schools, in contrast, are almost always owned and operated by a local congregation. This subsystem of schools was inaugurated in the formative years of the LC-MS and was instrumental in maintaining the organizational integrity of the synod in the wake of the emergent congregationalism sanctioned by the synodical constitution. Congregations were encouraged to establish elementary schools, whose manifest function was to provide newer generations with a well-grounded base of confessional Lutheranism. The schools also provided congregations with a cadre of trained laity under the di-

rect supervision of the parish pastor. The system which emerged to provide trained lay leaders as teachers for the synodical schools is the foundation for maintaining the ecclesiastical element of the synodical polity. The System is the organizational counterpoint that keeps congregationalism in check.²⁰

Congregational versus Ecclesiastical Authority

The historical foundation and the operating polity of the LC-MS include a unique and paradoxical mixture of congregational and ecclesiastical elements. The 150-year history of the LC-MS reflects periodic swings between efforts to control both the doctrine and practice of the congregations by national structures, and a tenacious congregationalism within the member churches.²¹

The constitutional structure of the synod virtually guarantees periodic tension between the synodical leadership and local congregations. In the wake of the Stephanite controversy and Walther's response, congregational autonomy became the bedrock of Missouri Synod polity — except that the tradition of confessional Lutheranism was also institutionalized via the means of clergy ordination (and the synod's educational system). One might say that there are two bedrocks of tradition supporting church polity within the synod. One is grounded in the European legacy and is committed to the defense of the historic confessions of the sixteenth century. This tradition demands ecclesiastical authority, which supports a well-established scholastic hierarchy within the leadership of the synod, which in turn provides a high degree of authority to the pastor in the local congregation. The other bedrock orientation is congregational autonomy. This tradition, which is more consistent with the American experience, encourages empowerment of laity and a concomitant distrust of centralized authority.²²

20. The importance of the school system, maintained by a synodically trained cadre of teachers and administrators, is underscored by synod's certification of properly trained teachers as "ministers." The more or less self-conscious attempt to check the teaching responsibility of unauthorized laity, at least in the synod's formative years, was also evidenced by LC-MS opposition to the emergent Sunday school movement.

21. Carl S. Munding, *Government in the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1947), and August R. Suelflow, "Church Polity," in *Heritage in Motion*, ed. August R. Suelflow (St. Louis: Concordia, 1998).

22. It should be immediately apparent that these competing traditions portend a unique status for a Missouri Synod parish pastor. He, more than anyone else, must balance his role between these two traditions. On the one hand, he is always in a precarious position with the constant threat of being caught in the cross fire between an aroused laity and ecclesiastical authority. On the other hand, he has the potential to marshal a considerable base of support to assert his will. It is the latter contingency which is at the heart of the current conflict.

The constitution of the synod has institutionalized “ecclesiastical congregationalism” by vesting final authority in a plenary convention of delegates equally divided between ordained clergy and laity. This balance of ecclesiastical and congregational representation virtually guarantees periodic conflict.²³ There are two factors, however, which portend change in the nature of the conflict as we enter a new century. The first is cultural, the second is social-structural. The first is associated with fundamental cultural shifts generally associated with what can be labeled a transition from an industrial age to an information age. The second is far less abstract and has been inherent in the polity of the synod from almost its very beginnings. This is the conflict between the central judicatory of the synod, the synodical convention and its elected leadership, and the localized districts. The latter factor is more easily grasped and is more directly central to the focus of this paper. It is there that we turn first.

Districts and Synod

Shortly after its creation in 1847, the synod created districts to more locally coordinate the activities of member congregations. From the beginning, some opposed the creation of these districts out of fear of splintering the synod.²⁴ Defined primarily by geography, districts were in more or less constant contact with synodical leadership and were intended to extend the ministerial oversight of the central hierarchy of the synod. They were never intended to be autonomous governing units. The language employed to describe the status of districts, as well as congregations, at the time of the creation of the synodical con-

23. Alan Graebner, *Uncertain Saints: The Laity in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1900-1970* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), in his analysis of the history of laity of the LC-MS points out that in spite of the circumstances which shaped the original constitution of the church, lay participation in the shaping of the polity of the synod was largely absent during its formative years. This owed largely to two factors. One was the legacy of clerical aristocracy imported from Germany. The other was the rural context in which the synod emerged. While many of Martin Stephan’s disciples, including Vehse and Marbach, were reared in more urbanized settings and were well educated, the great mass of the early German immigrants were of rural stock and settled in largely agrarian communities. The synod emerged in a context where the parish pastor was often not only spiritual adviser, but business, legal, and social counselor as well. This had the effect of further cementing the authority of the clergy while neutralizing the de facto authority provided to the laity by Walther’s interpretation of church polity.

24. August R. Suelflow, *The District-Synod Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in Historical Perspective, 1872-1922*, Report to the Synodical Survey Commission (St. Louis: Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1961).

stitution, is revealing. By way of clarifying the understanding that districts are bound to carry out synodical resolutions, the synodical polity emphasized the proviso that "The expediency allowed to congregations does not include Districts."²⁵ This language indicates that districts were not to enjoy the same kind of autonomy provided to congregations.

This proviso was accentuated in a report recently requested by synodical leadership to help define the role of districts in the governance of the synod. The report was authorized by, and presented to, the Task Force on National/District Relations, a committee whose very existence demonstrates the current concern addressed to this issue. The degree of concern is clearly illustrated by inclusion in the report of fifty-five synodical resolutions, dated from 1962 to 1998, that address the role of districts in the polity of synod. The timing of the emergence of the resolutions, beginning in 1962, is significant.²⁶ The clear substantive pattern of the resolutions, even more so. The great preponderance seek to assert the subordinate status of the districts vis-à-vis the national synodical leadership.

It is clear that the original intention of the founding fathers of the synod was that districts were to be operative extensions of synod. This is illustrated by the language used to describe district operatives. Each district was further subdivided into circuits, and these circuits were to be directed by "counselors." That the most direct synodical liaison to local congregations was designated a "counselor" underscores the intent of the leadership that the lower judicatories of the synod were to provide continuity of pastoral oversight. Over time, however, this changed. In a 1961 report to the synodical leadership, August Suelflow made this observation about the office of circuit counselor: "What was originally conceived as a highly spiritual office, instituted for the proper supervision of doctrinal and moral standards of the Synod, gradually emerged into that of a synodical agent in the lowest level of the administrative structure."²⁷

25. Raymond L. Hartwig, *Report on Pertinent CCM Rulings*, Memo to the Task Force on National/District Synodical Relations (St. Louis: Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, February 26, 1999).

26. The revolutionary zeitgeist of the 1960s, characterized not only by a pattern of confrontation with political authority but also by a questioning of the very normative standards upon which primary institutions rest, is well documented. The period was particularly traumatic for the LC-MS. The conflict over the appropriate interpretation of biblical inerrancy between the majority of the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and the elected leadership of the synod precipitated a synodical split in the 1970s. John Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile: Confessional Hope and Institutional Conflict* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), who as president of Concordia Seminary was at the center of this controversy, indicates in his memoirs his belief that existing tension among the seminary faculty, resulting from disagreements over U.S. policy in Vietnam, was a significant factor in igniting the confrontation.

27. Suelflow, *District-Synod Relations*, p. 19.

Circuits were not constitutionally structured to be governing units, but they have become important elements in the governance of synod in that they have become the “precincts” from which voting delegates to the governing national convention are selected.²⁸

We have already noted that in recent years leaders at the national level have been increasingly concerned that districts are assuming unintended authority to act as autonomous agents in providing counsel to congregations. The current conflict between the Florida-Georgia District and the national leadership did not emerge as an isolated event and can be viewed as symptomatic of a trend. One may well ask what the larger issue is that portends increased tension between the national leadership and regional districts. There are, no doubt, many issues that encourage this conflict, but generally they are symptomatic of the natural consequences of growth and expansion. Given the increased breadth and complexity of synodical jurisdictions, it is no longer clear that the original intention for which districts were created can be sustained.

Two patterns, characteristic of the larger demographic realignment of the United States, have reshaped the congregational distribution within the LC-MS. The first is a general shift of the population away from the Midwest (and the East) toward other parts of the country, especially the South and the West. This has produced a realignment of the nationwide distribution of congregations. Second, the ongoing pattern of urbanization in the twentieth century has accentuated the growth of urban and suburban congregations at the expense of rural congregations. An important consequence of the increasing urbanization of the synod is the emergence of a laity which is increasingly diverse, better educated, less responsive to traditional authority, and more cosmopolitan. Urbanization has tended to reorient the laity, away from respect for traditional hierarchical patterns of authority and toward increased congregational autonomy. At the same time, geographical expansion has tended to disperse System-trained leadership away from the Midwest. The consequence of these related trends has been to reduce the social distance between the local synodically trained leaders, who are being increasingly confronted by an aroused laity, while increasing the social distance between operatives within the System.²⁹

28. The triennial national synodical convention is the chief governing body of the synod. The convention's authority has repeatedly been challenged (chiefly by members of larger, more urbanized congregations) as being unrepresentative of the body of synod at large. The political structure, originally created to facilitate pastoral oversight, effectively gives each congregation, regardless of size, an equal vote in defining church polity.

29. Relative social distance is manifested in a variety of ways. Most immediately, it is reflected in formal administrative procedures. In this case, the ongoing administration of congregations is far more likely to be conducted in consultation with district leaders than with synodi-

A natural consequence of these trends has been for the role of districts to wax, while the role of synod has tended to decline. The more localized judicatories of synod (districts) are governed by leaders elected in triennial district conventions, by the vote of a pastoral and lay delegate from each congregation. In recent years districts have generally been reorganized and have expanded district staffing to provide more direct services to congregations. As the distinct service responsibilities of districts have expanded, interaction between district officials and congregational leaders has expanded. Similarly, direct interaction between the synodical leadership and congregational leaders has been less frequent. This is what is meant, in sociological language, by saying that the social distance between district leaders and congregation leaders has declined while the social distance between congregations and synod has increased. It can be further assumed that the relative social distance between districts and synod will be associated with geographical proximity. One would anticipate that the farther congregations are from the Midwest, the greater will be the social distance between synodical leadership and congregational leadership. This is supported by available data. In recent years, several studies have indicated that the allegiance of church members to their congregations has grown, while identification with synod has greatly diminished.³⁰

One of the consequences of the reshaping of the landscape of synodical polity has been the emergence of distinctly different judicatory cultures at the synodical and district levels of administration. Michael Kalmes, a political scientist and a member of the faculty of the Concordia University System of the LC-MS, has observed that the different judicatory cultures can easily be observed by comparing the participants at any given district convention with those at the synodical convention. The prototypical participant at a district convention is the parish pastor and a lay delegate who, as often as not, is a confidant of the pastor. The agenda of district conventions reflects this constituency; that is, it will most directly reflect issues of congregational practice. On the other hand, the prototypical participant at the synodical convention is an individual, whether clergy or lay, who is a recognized "name" within the synod. This is to say that the constituency of the synodical convention is far more

cal leaders. But more importantly, social distance is reflected in consciousness of kind and in what could be described as cultural conversation. Reduced social distance tends to frame conversations in a context of greater intimacy with an associated tendency toward like-mindedness. Increased social distance has the opposite effect. One ought to anticipate that any increase in social distance, between congregations and synodical leadership, will be reflected in a tendency to exaggerate differences that will inevitably emerge from time to time.

30. See, for example, *The Charron Report to the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Charron Research and Information, 1997).

likely to be people who have a long-established reputation within the synod. Not surprisingly, the agenda of the synodical convention will be oriented more toward doctrinal issues.

The conversations, at these two levels of polity, are quite often qualitatively different. Not only will the nature of the agenda vary between these two forums, but the very nature of the language used to frame issues will vary. The following theological essay by Eugene Bunkowske shows that the language used to frame the multiplicity of resolutions relative to eucharistic practice introduced at the 1998 synodical convention varied substantively. One need not look too long to discern that much of the difference follows from differing understandings of what it means to be in fellowship (or community). To anticipate how the synod might respond to the current impasse, illustrated by the conflict between the Florida-Georgia District and the synod at large, we need to examine why at this point in history there is such fundamental disagreement among members of the synod as to the meaning of "community." And here we are brought back to the question of fellowship.

It is also here that we confront the second challenge facing the LC-MS at the turn of the century. If the first challenge is to accommodate the changing social-structural patterns associated with geographical distribution and an urbanized laity, the second challenge is to accommodate the realignment of "community" (or fellowship) associated with the transition from an industrial-based culture to an information-based culture. While a culture shift is less immediately visible than a social-structural shift, the impact may be more far-reaching.

Culture War, the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism, and the Redefinition of Fellowship

The LC-MS emerged in opposition to the dominant culture of the American frontier of the early nineteenth century, a culture that was driven in large part by a fusion of Jeffersonian liberalism and evangelical Protestantism. The synod was forged by leaders who had emerged from a climate of European repression and were on a crusade to preserve confessional Lutheranism in territory occupied by evangelical enthusiasts. This context provided the synod with its prevailing spirit, but over the years the infusion of English, the scattering of the flock from the Midwest, and the diversification of the membership have weakened the center. Emergent cultural forces will soon force the synod to make some difficult decisions. These decisions are likely either to move it to the cultural margins, as the defender of traditional confessional Lutheranism, or to ex-

pand a dialogue with modern evangelicalism to produce a new confessional-evangelical Lutheran church.³¹

The larger context for this choice is the emergence of the information age, what some have called postmodernism, and what Alvin Toffler has called the third wave.³² It is still far from clear how the emergence of an information age will impact either the structure of the LC-MS or other Christian denominations. But a case can be made that modern evangelicalism is a consequence of the emergence of postmodernism (see n. 2 above). A further case can be made that the emergent conflict in the LC-MS over close(d) communion is a response to contemporary evangelical revival. This is not to say that evangelical revival is exclusively a twentieth-century phenomenon. A nineteenth-century version was apparent to Friedrich Wyneken when he walked into that revival meeting at Baltimore in 1834. The circumstances at the dawn of the twenty-first century, however, have recast this historic conflict between evangelicalism and confessional Lutheranism in a new light.

This is not the place to provide a detailed assessment of the impact of postmodernism on American religious life. My purpose here is to highlight two consequences of the third wave that I believe frame the current polity of the LC-MS. The first is the rise of moral relativism and the reciprocal emergence of

31. Advocates of confessional Lutheranism are properly suspicious of attempts to accommodate culture in the organization of church polity. If the synod opts to remain a main player in American evangelical Christianity, one of the primary challenges facing synodical leadership is to define what is essential to preserve a distinctively Lutheran church in the cultural landscape of the information age. Once this is done, culture must be accommodated for the church to successfully carry the Great Commission forward. The problem is always one of preserving the historical confessions in a changing cultural landscape. To provide for a proper application of the Eucharist, Lutheran theologians must discern the Lord's understanding of who is to properly be invited to the meal, and how the Lord intended his meal to build up the body. The question raised here is how the dispersion of authority, and a concomitant acceleration of individualism, conditioned by instantaneous and largely uncontrollable mass communication, will change the way in which postmodern people construct community. How will the church be constructed within the changing contours of this emergent community? It is axiomatic to sociology that people will seek fellowship. How best to accommodate this need for fellowship, while preserving a biblically defined church, is the issue at dispute in the current case study.

32. Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Morrow, 1980). Toffler has argued that modern civilization has emerged as the consequence of two great technological revolutions. He uses the metaphor of tidal waves to illustrate the power each of these movements had on the transformation of the extant culture. The old cultures were simply swept away as consequences of the emergent technology. The first wave, the emergence of agriculture, swept away hunter-gatherer culture forms. The second wave, industrialization, swept away agrarian forms of social organization. Toffler believes that the third wave, the emergence of an information society, will have similar impact on the existing social order.

modern evangelicalism. The second is the dispersion of authority. We will look at the rise of relativism first.

Wyneken was persuaded that, in 1834, evangelical revivalists were not in fellowship with confessional Lutherans. I have made the case that this was a reflection of the context of his time. At the time Wyneken arrived in the United States, German Lutherans had been forced into a union that imposed upon them a Reformed theology. Wyneken and his comrades were persuaded that, via Luther, Germany was the appointed defender of the true church. And in the early nineteenth century, this church was being held captive. Much like Israel during the Babylonian exile, the German Lutheran pioneers had a task to create and maintain a church in exile. For these pioneers, revivalists and sectarians were rightly excluded from fellowship. Their primary task was not to evangelize the unchurched but to gather the scattered saints.

The foundation of the church these pioneers created was a carefully articulated and jealously defended doctrine that embraced Luther's understanding of the church. The greatest threat to the church, especially in the religious free market of the American frontier, was unionism (see n. 8). While there was no threat of a state-imposed unionism on the frontier, the newly mandated congregational autonomy provided a constant threat of gradualist unionism. Admission to fellowship was strictly guarded and was predicated on individual assent to all aspects of this doctrine. Agreement with Luther's understanding of the sacraments, especially his understanding of the Lord's Supper, was the most visible means of marking fellowship. But it would not be sufficient simply to agree with Luther's understanding of the "true presence" in the meal. It was necessary for those who would participate in the sacrament to be in complete conformity with the Lutheran understanding of doctrine. Given the context of the nineteenth century, it is difficult to quarrel with this understanding of fellowship. The question for the current leadership of the LC-MS is whether full conformity with doctrine is still an appropriate standard for fellowship in the twenty-first century.

It may be more appropriate to phrase the question differently. Should the LC-MS choose to enter into dialogue with modern evangelicalism, seeking common ground while maintaining its commitment to confessional Lutheranism, the appropriate question is: What are the essential standards of doctrinal commitment necessary to maintain a truly confessional Lutheran church? And this in turn raises an equally difficult question: Who should be trusted with the task to decide? These questions presuppose that something is to be gained by seeking common ground with modern evangelicalism. There are many in the LC-MS who see little reason to enter this dialogue. Better, they would say, would be to maintain constancy and continue to present confessional Lutheranism as a clearly demonstrable alternative to the vagaries of contemporary culture.

How ought the LC-MS respond to postmodernism, and to what degree should it participate with evangelicals in this response? Those who would support a more open communion policy are persuaded that the current threat to the church is not so much unionism as it is relativism. The question is: Has the cultural landscape shifted to the degree that confessional Lutherans now have more common ground with contemporary evangelicals than disagreements that divide? To the extent that relativism is a greater threat to the church than unionism, and to the extent that contemporary evangelicalism is primarily a response to relativism, are contemporary confessional Lutherans now largely in fellowship with evangelicals?

The understanding of “fellowship” is now the key issue. The term is loaded with symbolic meaning for many in the LC-MS because it is central to the synod’s defining spirit. We could use a less value-loaded term such as “community” and express the same idea, but this would be missing the point. Those Missouri Lutherans who would find affinity with evangelicals understand fellowship more subjectively. They define it in the context of like-mindedness and are more comfortable with shifting constellations of fellowship groups who share at least some common presuppositions. These Lutherans would say that they are no less confessional in their understanding of the historic confessions, but while they use the confessions as their own individual anchor, they are also willing to seek fellowship with other Christians who share certain other common understandings.

This is a profoundly different understanding of the church than the one traditionally posed by the LC-MS.³³ This view significantly accentuates the “invisible church” as the true church, while reciprocally diminishing denominationalism. For the contemporary advocates of the invisible church, the current cultural context accentuates fellowship amongst those Christians who share a belief in the authority of Scripture. More to the point, these Lutherans view those Christians who (regardless of denominational affiliation) share a common understanding of the Sacrament of the Altar as being in community — or fellowship.³⁴ Lutherans of this bent would view the act of withholding the Eucha-

33. John Kayser, an LC-MS pastor at a rural parish in Michigan, has observed that when Walther articulated his doctrine of the “invisible church,” he planted the seeds of the Florida-Georgia communion policy statement. As Kayser puts it: “You cannot believe in the Invisible Church and exclusive communion at the same time if you would be intellectually honest.”

34. St. Luke Lutheran Church in Ann Arbor, Mich., for example, views its policy as one of “close” (as opposed to “closed”) communion and defines its policy this way:

Holy Communion is divinely instituted. Jesus Christ gives His true (real) body and blood under the forms of bread and wine. We thus hold that the bread and wine are not

rist from those who share a common understanding of it but lack an appropriate denominational affiliation as an act of inhospitality — and even bigotry.³⁵

If this view of fellowship defines one camp of Missouri Lutherans, contrast it with that of those who have a more traditional understanding of fellowship. For these people fellowship represents a shared legacy; it is *Gemeinschaft*.³⁶ For them community/fellowship is objective, not individually subjective. It defines who one is, and just as festival meals are the occasion for reunion of family, the communion meal is the occasion for the gathering of a body of people who share a common history and embrace a heritage of faith. The family meal is the appropriate metaphor here, and while one may invite acquaintances to common meals, the communion meal is a festival meal and publicly signifies the family of believers. Such a meal is not to be taken lightly, and while

mere symbols of Jesus' body and blood. When we receive the bread and wine, we receive in fact the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

In Communion we celebrate this forgiveness and receive it through faith, as we eat and drink. In Communion we remember Jesus' suffering and death, His rising from the dead and return to heaven, and the promise of His coming again. In Communion the Good News of full salvation is offered to those who "hunger and thirst after righteousness."

We believe that, as we eat and drink this Supper, God strengthens our faith in Jesus Christ and our love for one another.

Therefore, we invite to the Lord's Table all who:

have been instructed in the meaning of Communion; have been baptized in the name of the Triune God; have received Jesus Christ as their personal savior and Lord; and agree with our confession; are not living in open rebellion against the Word of God, and do not hold willful and persistent hatred, resentment or anger against any other person.

Ann Arbor, Mich., St. Luke Lutheran Church: *Worship Guide*, 2002.

35. I have described fellowship, defined within the context of the invisible church, as subjective in nature. It is subjective in the sense that it is individualized. But even for such subjective, individual choices there are objective criteria that mark this kind of fellowship, i.e., adherence to the authority of Scripture and subscription to belief in the true presence in the Eucharist. This is nonetheless objectivity of a different quality than that designated by formal membership in a congregation with denominational affiliation.

36. Ferdinand Toennies introduced *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* into the sociology lexicon over a century ago. The most frequently heard contemporary translations of the terms are, respectively, "community" and "society." A closer literal translation from the German is "natural will" and "rational will." Relationships in a community that are of the first type are binding in the sense that they have intrinsic significance, such as those that bind families and close friendships. *Gemeinschaft* relationships are ends in themselves rather than means to an end. They are rooted in and exhibit such qualities as tradition, shared values, intimacies, and "we-ness." These relationships tend to be comprehensive and long term. They are, in some sense, natural. See F. Toennies, *Community and Society — Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, translated and supplemented by C. P. Loomis, 2nd ed. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1957), pp. 248ff.

it would be inhospitable not to welcome acquaintances and strangers to public worship, the meal is reserved for those who seek full fellowship with the body. From this perspective, those who express a desire to participate in the Eucharist are being asked to make a life-changing decision. To treat the meal with any less reverence would be to diminish the faith of the believers and to minimize what is being asked of participants.

The language of community, fellowship, and communion is understood very differently by Lutherans of differing bents. While those who employ a more traditional language continue to view unionism as the greatest threat to fellowship, those who employ a more contemporary language view relativism as the greater threat. Each faction, employing its own respective language, views the conflict between the church and the world from a radically different perspective. One perspective is more consistent with modernism, the other with postmodernism.

The Church in a Postmodern World

James Hunter has argued in *Culture Wars* that the emergence of postmodernism has reshaped the nature of denominationalism in the United States.³⁷ In the nineteenth century denominational boundaries reflected disagreements among people who framed their positions in the context of biblical language. In this cultural landscape, the Bible was authoritative and denominational disagreements were doctrinal in nature. The dialogue between those in fellowship with the church and those not in fellowship centered on appropriate interpretation of scripturally mandated injunctions. There were ample opportunity and considerable encouragement to explore subtlety and nuance in the biblical narrative. The differences that inevitably emerged created, encouraged, and strengthened denominational affiliations.

The result was an expansion of religious pluralism. In an arena where no single denomination could gain a particular advantage, a measure of cultural consensus also emerged. America became, in this cultural sense, a Christian nation. It was in this context that the LC-MS emerged and negotiated its location in the larger fabric of American culture. While, as we have noted, the LC-MS emerged as a uniquely German American synod, it was integrated into an American culture defined largely through the language, ideals, and legitimating myths of a biblical worldview.

37. James D. Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

With time, as pluralism expanded, so did individual and institutional tolerance. The LC-MS, along with an increasing diversity of other denominations, found its place in this arrangement. What emerged was an American religious landscape in which mutual denominational toleration was the rule. The LC-MS emerged as a self-consciously German American confessional Lutheran fellowship. Inclusion in the fellowship required minimally that one submit to congregational authority, which is to say that one was expected to join a church. Those who would aspire to leadership in the fellowship would further be required to submit to the authority of the System, which meant being trained at a synodical college or seminary and/or being certified for ministry by synodically designated authorities. Thus emerged an understanding of fellowship that marked membership by categorical inclusion in the organized church. This system was hardly unique to the LC-MS, and was in fact the general pattern for Christian denominationalism. The larger system of American denominationalism was enabled by a general acceptance of biblical theism that provided the language in which this arrangement was negotiated.

The arrangement worked well enough for the LC-MS until the second decade of the twentieth century. The entrance of the United States into war with Germany, first in 1917 and later in 1941, changed the terms of the arrangement. The First World War, and an accompanying anti-German backlash, accelerated the erosion of the self-consciously German identity of the synod. But while the synod found it increasingly difficult to maintain its German identity after the war, it maintained its categorical integrity by emphasizing its denominational boundaries, especially its emphasis on its mission to preserve *Reine Lehre*.

The Second World War further undermined the German identity of the synod, but Hunter describes how larger demographic trends undermined the overall denominational balance as well. This balance was upset by the further expansion of pluralism, the continued growth of Catholics, and the rapid growth of Mormons, Islam, and New Age variants of religious expression, especially the human potential movement. Particularly important was the growth in the proportion of "secularists" (those who indicate "none" for religious preference) after World War Two. Secularists, as a group, are disproportionately well educated and have had a particularly important impact on redefining religious dialogue in the postmodern era. By 1990 they constituted over 10 percent of the population. This most recent expansion of pluralism signifies the collapse of the long-standing Judeo-Christian consensus in American public life.

As we enter the new millennium, the organizing principle of American pluralism has fundamentally changed. Religious dialogue no longer centers on theological or doctrinal disagreements, but now reflects a more fundamental disagreement over the very sources of moral truth. The result has been an in-

crease in religious anomie. The prevailing source of this anomie is uncertainty about how to reconcile traditional Christian theology with the discoveries of modern scientific inquiry. Theology has tended to adopt the rules of inquiry which define scientific discourse. This “higher critical” methodology has opened the door to a frontal assault on the biblical narrative. As a result, defenders of orthodoxy have mounted an organized defense of the traditional faith. While neoorthodoxy has taken different forms in different faith communities, among Protestants it has focused upon defense of Scripture.

A consequence of the assault on biblical authority has been the expansion of modern evangelicalism, along with the waning of denominational loyalty and the expansion of parachurch organizations — independent agencies, often drawing interdenominational support, organized on behalf of a particular political, social, or spiritual mission. “*When coupled with the weakening of denominational ties, this expansion has actually encouraged the deepening of century-old intrafaith divisions,*” first, because these groups are partisan both in nature and agenda and second, because they tend to coalesce around the opposing ends of the “new cultural axis”: orthodoxy and progressivism.³⁸

Hunter’s observation that intrafaith divisions have been accentuated by increased partisanship reflecting larger cultural trends is directly pertinent to the LC-MS synodical split of the 1970s. To a large degree this experience shapes the synodical landscape in which the current conflict is being played out. More directly, Hunter’s observation about weakened denominational loyalties, reflecting emerging new alliances of orthodox and progressive Christians, is an apt characterization of emerging conflict within the synod. These emerging alliances have thrust many Missouri Lutherans, generally younger and more urban, into associations which Hunter describes as a “new ecumenism” in which distinct and separate religions share resources and work together toward common objectives. This new ecumenism “represents the key institutional expression of the realignment of American public culture.”³⁹

It is this new ecumenism that is at the heart of the division expressed by the current conflict over communion practice within the LC-MS. Those who embrace and participate in the new ecumenism are generally not only younger and more urbanized, they are more likely to inhabit the “saltwater” districts of the synod — those farther from St. Louis and the Midwest. These Missouri Lutherans are far more likely to view emergent religious anomie and moral relativism as the primary threats to the church. They are far more likely to seek fellowship with Christians of other denominations who share common cultural

38. Hunter, *Culture Wars*, p. 90; emphasis original.

39. Hunter, *Culture Wars*, p. 98.

objectives. They are far more likely to view themselves as, in fact, in fellowship with these non-LC-MS Christians.⁴⁰

For Missouri Lutherans of a more traditional bent, who tend to be older and are more likely to be concentrated in the Midwest, the new ecumenism is still ecumenism. For them unionism remains the principal threat to the church, and the communion table is the place where union stops.

Conclusions and Options

In the early 1980s I represented my local congregation as a lay delegate to the triennial convention of the Rocky Mountain District of the LC-MS. I shared a room with a man in his seventies who was representing a congregation located in suburban Denver. He related how he had moved as a young man to Denver in the 1930s, and he spoke with pride about how he had helped to build the first LC-MS church in his community. He had literally built his church, as he was a carpenter by trade. Later when his congregation outgrew that first church, he helped build a larger one. He loved his church and he loved the LC-MS. But his countenance visibly shrank as he related how a few years prior to our meeting his congregation had split with the pastor suddenly leaving, taking half the congregation with him. Tears were in his eyes as he spoke of how families who had worshiped together for generations now no longer spoke to one another. What happened? I asked. "It was this Seminec thing," he said.⁴¹ "Something happened at the seminary in St. Louis and our pastor left the Synod. It tore my church apart and I still don't know what it was all about."

40. While this needs to be documented, there is an apparent paradox in the attitude of postmodern Lutherans toward the Sacrament of the Altar. In many emergent seeker-oriented Lutheran congregations, the sacrament is routinely celebrated at all worship services. Thus, even as they have "opened" the policy of participation, they have routinized the practice. Lutherans of a more traditional bent often observe that by routinizing the practice they have diminished the sacrament. Postmodern Lutherans would of course disagree. It could be said that in the relativist, rationalized postmodern age people have an increased hunger for the transcendent, and that the value of mystery of the sacraments is accentuated by the age.

41. In the early 1970s charges of teaching false doctrine were leveled against several faculty members at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, by the leadership of the synod. The resulting conflict eventually led to the dismissal of the seminary president, resulting in a walkout by the majority of the faculty and the students of the seminary. These faculty and students established Concordia Seminary in Exile (Seminec) — later renamed Christ Seminary in Exile. The conflict produced a synod-wide split that resulted when synodical members sympathetic to the faculty left the LC-MS and created a new Lutheran synod — the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). The AELC later became part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) with the creation of that synod in 1988.

Doctrinal disputes have consequences that spread far beyond convention halls, seminary classrooms, and board meetings. The LC-MS is still reeling from the doctrinal dispute that split the synod in the 1970s. If the current conflict over the communion table produces the kind of animus that characterized the conflict of the 1970s, it is almost certain that the LC-MS will divide again. Another split will predictably relegate the remnants of the synod to a significantly reduced role in shaping Lutheranism in the twenty-first century. This is what is at stake in the current controversy. Given the diametrically opposed perspectives brought to the discussion by the parties on each side, there will be no easy solution to the conflict.

This crisis has been precipitated by different understandings of what constitutes fellowship in the postmodern era. Postmodernism has also complicated the search for a solution. As a consequence of the transition to an information age, the very nature of authority has changed. Hierarchical authority was a product of the industrial age, where institutional organization mandated centralized governance. The age of universal access to information mandates authority based on persuasion. It is incumbent on those in positions of leadership within the synod to deliberately facilitate dialogue if another synodical rupture is to be avoided. Conformity to doctrine cannot be mandated in the postmodern era. There is a paradox here. Lutherans in the postmodern era can increasingly be expected to invoke a Reformation formula to the resolution of doctrinal disputes: unless convinced by plain reason and the Word of God, they are unlikely to submit to authority.

While the task facing the LC-MS leadership is daunting, the legacy of the pioneers of the synod has given the LC-MS a unique polity structure which is well suited to governance in the postmodern era. Missouri's uniquely dualistic governance structure, its congregational ecclesiastical polity, provides an opportunity for inventive governance in the twenty-first century. If, as Francis Fukuyama has argued, governance in the information age will be increasingly localized around *Gemeinschaft* constellations of like-minded peoples,⁴² one could hardly imagine a better-suited polity structure than that of the LC-MS. A Reformation-grounded, confessional Lutheran church, one that places governance in the hands of an informed laity that is committed to biblical authority and seeks the guidance of an informed *ecclesia*, can be the model for church governance in the twenty-first century.

The problem is that the LC-MS has never really trusted this political structure. Having laid the foundation of this polity in the middle of the nine-

42. Francis Fukuyama, "The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstruction of Social Order," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1999.

teenth century, it has tended to rely on the earlier European model of hierarchically imposed ecclesiastical governance. The split of the 1970s is evidence of what will inevitably happen if one faction seeks to impose its will by fiat. Contemporary Lutherans will not abide an imposed solution. The challenge to the synodical leadership is to persuade an informed laity. Governance via trust is the only legitimate authority in the postmodern era. If closed communion is clearly biblically mandated, then the *ecclesia* must make its case. If closed communion is more appropriately understood as a culturally mandated means to resist unionism, then closed communion is unlikely to stand. For contemporary Lutherans, unionism is not the issue.

If, on the other hand, the leadership of the synod is convinced that unionism is still the primary threat to confessional Lutheranism, then it must hold its ground. But the leadership will do well to count the cost. An anti-unionist church will almost certainly be relegated to the margins of American society in the twenty-first century.

Postscript

At the triennial convention of the LC-MS held in July of 2001, there were several essays delivered by seminary faculty in defense of the traditional synodical position on close(d) communion, but nothing was to be heard on the issue from the convention floor. This was because the larger issue of ecclesiastic versus congregational authority took center stage and trumped the conflict over communion. While the parameters of that conflict are the stuff of another chapter, the way this issue plays itself out will largely direct the resolution of the communion issue. The conflict at the 2001 convention centered on the issue of pastoral leadership and was reflected in two of the three most contentious issues debated on the floor.⁴³

The first of these two motions affirmed Walther's understanding of church and ministry articulated in the wake of the Altenburg debate and originally affirmed by the synod in convention in 1851. The motion was carried. It effectively reaffirmed the foundation for a church polity that has been described in this paper as "ecclesiastical congregationalism." Debate on this issue was mildly contentious, and the motion was supported by a 72 percent majority.

43. The third issue, which was particularly contentious, was a motion to declare that the synod no longer recognize the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to be an orthodox Lutheran body. The motion was in response to the ELCA's decision to enter into altar and pulpit fellowship agreements with Reformed and Episcopal church bodies. The convention approved this motion.

The debate was preparatory to a far more contentious debate over pastoral leadership. This issue had been brewing for at least two decades and centered on an emerging critical shortage of pastors synod-wide.

There is not space here to describe the details of this debate. A brief summary of this story is that, via a substitute resolution from the floor of the convention, the delegates rejected recommendations from synodical leaders, largely represented by seminary faculty, and instead authorized lay ministry in congregations. While the circumstances under which a congregation was authorized to provide ministry via "deacons" were nuanced to provide for pastoral oversight, the motion significantly reduced the capacity of the national leadership, particularly the seminary faculty, to monitor ministry in local congregations. The debate on this issue was contentious, and after several parliamentary maneuvers to derail it failed, the motion was supported by a bare majority (less than 52 percent). This issue threatens to undo the delicate balance of ecclesiastical versus congregational oversight of the polity of the LC-MS, and will almost certainly take center stage for at least the next decade.