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## The Missouri Synod and the Historical Question of Unionism and Syncretism

Gerhard H. Bode Jr.

When The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was organized in 1847, the founders adopted a constitution containing conditions of membership. In order to join the Synod and maintain fellowship with it, prospective members (in 1847 this meant congregations and pastors) would be obliged to accept a series of terms. These included requirements such as acceptance of the Scriptures as the written word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and practice, and subscription to the Lutheran Confessions as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of God's word. Immediately following this first condition (which is regarded as the Synod's confessional basis) was the renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description. Required also among the conditions of membership were the regular call of church workers, exclusive use of doctrinally pure agendas, hymnbooks, and catechisms in churches and schools, and regular procedures for receiving members into the Synod. These conditions have been maintained with few changes to the present day, and congregations, pastors, and other servants in the church are still required to hold to them if they wish to enter the Synod and retain membership in it. These conditions reveal much about how the founders of the Synod understood what it means to be church, what it means to be a confessional, Lutheran church, and what it means to be a member of that church.

This study will focus on the second condition of membership, the one that follows immediately after acceptance of the Synod's confessional basis, that is, the renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description. In particular, the historical background and the original meaning and purpose of this phrase in the Synod constitution will be examined.<sup>1</sup> I will attempt to paint with broad strokes some of the chief theological concerns of the Synod founders regarding the true unity of the church and its confession by addressing three basic questions. First, why is the renun-

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<sup>1</sup> In 2011, I was asked by the Synod's Commission on Constitutional Matters to draft a historical study of this part of the constitution. That study examined the question of the understanding of unionism and syncretism through the first forty years of the Synod's history. This paper will draw from the findings of that study.

ciation of unionism and syncretism in the Synod's constitution? Second, how did the founders understand the concern for it? Finally, why does it matter for us today?

Periodically during its history, the Synod has addressed these questions with greater interest and attention than at other times. The goal of this study is to further the ongoing discussions about these important questions.

### **I. The Historical Background and the Concern about Unionism and Syncretism**

The concern of Lutherans about the mixing of churches and doctrines originates in the sixteenth century. While the external mingling of churches or confessional bodies was perhaps less a problem in the early period of Lutheranism, syncretism was, nevertheless, a relatively familiar concern to Luther and other Lutheran reformers. The early Missouri Synod theologians also would have been familiar with the seventeenth-century Syncretistic Controversy and the discord it caused among Lutherans at that time.<sup>2</sup> This controversy resulted from the attempt of some Lutheran theologians to forge confessional unity between the Lutheran and Reformed churches in the hope of an eventual reunion with the Roman church. One of the goals of the proponents of this effort was to find common ground in the councils and doctrines of the early church and to achieve consensus through a distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith. Opponents charged that the attempt was actually a mixing or blending of doctrines, resulting in a false unity and a loss of the true teachings of the Scriptures. The question of both *Kirchenmengerei* (the blending of churches) and *Glaubensmengerei* (the blending of doctrines)

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<sup>2</sup> "Der Calixtinische Synkretismus," *Lehre und Wehre* 23 (1877): 8-15, 55-57, 76-89, 116-119. This article by an unidentified author discusses the differences and similarities between the "syncretism" in the seventeenth century and the "unionism" in the nineteenth century. For a sense of how the early Missouri Synod theologians understood Luther, the Confessions, and the Lutheran dogmaticians in support of their position on unionism and syncretism, see C.F.W. Walther, *The Church and the Office of the Ministry: The Voice of Our Church on the Question of Church and Office*, trans. John T. Mueller, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), especially Thesis VIII; C.F.W. Walther, *The True Visible Church: and, The Form of a Christian Congregation*, trans. John T. Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), especially Thesis XXI of the former and § 32 of the latter; Johann W. Baier and C.F.W. Walther, *Joh. Guilielmi Baieri Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Lutherischer Concordia-Verlag, 1879), 3:665-672; and Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950-1957), 3:419-427.

remained a topic of concern for Lutheran churches well into the nineteenth century and beyond, both in the German lands and in North America.

*The Union Movement in the German Lands*

The union movement in the German lands in the nineteenth century had a profound impact on those Lutherans who immigrated to America and founded the Missouri Synod. The influences of the Enlightenment and Rationalism caused some theologians in Germany (Lutheran and Reformed alike) to deliberate on what was the true heritage of the Reformation and what were the essential articles of the evangelical faith and life. The result was a newfound emphasis on a common faith and mutual love, encouraging the union of both Lutheran and Reformed churches. This “reawakening” of religion and reassessment of the Reformation’s impact coincided with the revival of what was perceived to be the true Christian fear of God and love of the church in the years following the devastation and disruption of the Napoleonic wars. In these circumstances, many in the German lands felt a desire for Christian concord and unity. The purpose of the state, in part, was to engineer greater political unity and national solidarity through the unification of religion within the state.

This movement toward reunion involved both the external unification of churches long separated by confessional divides as well as the internal blending of doctrines. In many cases, what was agreed upon as the doctrinal foundation were the most basic Christian, creedal teachings. The other “non-essential” doctrines were often set aside, regarded as remnants of old doctrinal controversies now overcome through goodwill and love. Doctrinal differences were obscured as confessional consciences declined.

The desire for unity was expressed most dramatically, and with great effect, through the program of unionizing churches throughout the German lands, the most significant being in the largest of the German territories, Prussia.<sup>3</sup> The founding of the “Prussian Union” church was celebrated as part of the festivities commemorating the 300th anniversary of the Reformation in 1817. In almost every case, these unions brought Lutheran and Reformed churches into one united church, sometimes

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the churches in the territory of Nassau were united by a general synod in August 1817. A month later, Friedrich Wilhelm III, the Calvinist King of Prussia, began his drive to forge the new “Evangelical Church of Prussia.” Additional union churches were organized in Rhineland-Palatinate (1818), Hanau and Fulda (1818), Anhalt-Bernberg (1820), Waldeck, Pyrmont, and Baden (1821), Hesse (1818–1823), and Dessau (1827). Pressures toward unification were strong in other German territories, as well.

called an “Evangelical” church. Use of a “union” agenda was often required in church services. In many instances, these ecclesiastical unions were initiated—and enforced, if needed—by the state, often with the cooperation of church leaders.

Reaction to the union movement was strong in both Lutheran and Reformed circles. On the part of Lutherans, the Confessional Revival maintained that true unity in the church was based on the truth of God’s word alone. Representatives of the Confessional Revival coined the term “Unionism” to identify not only the union movement in the German lands but also its effects. They saw grave dangers in the secular government’s effort to merge the Lutheran and Reformed churches into a union. First, they stressed that the government had no role in determining the content and practice of faith; such was a violation of God’s two kingdoms. The second danger was even more serious in that the union movement, with its compromising of doctrine, attacked the truth of God’s word and threatened the gospel. Confronted by these problems, the Confessional Revival as a movement sought to restore true doctrine and practice to the Lutheran Church through fidelity to the Scriptures and a revitalized adherence to the teachings of the Lutheran Confessions, as well as to the theology of Luther and the Lutheran Orthodox theologians. Only in this way, it was believed, could the Lutheran Church be preserved.

#### *American Lutheranism and the General Synod*

In the American setting, the situation was slightly different for Lutherans in the early nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Many who had immigrated to America in the previous centuries had become Americanized, especially in the years after the founding of the republic. Free from government intrusion, Lutherans saw possibilities for the church in this new country not found in Europe. Some Lutheran church leaders, also influenced by Pietism, Rationalism, and doctrinal indifference, saw an opportunity for the Protestant churches to unite in a way previously impossible. One prominent example was Samuel Simon Schmucker (1799–1873), leader of

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<sup>4</sup> It was not uncommon for pastors in nineteenth-century America to serve congregations of “mixed” confession, congregations comprised of German immigrants from both Lutheran and Reformed backgrounds. Various reasons led them to form united congregations, among them doctrinal indifference and the lack of pastors. In some cases, the congregations might subscribe to both the Augsburg Confession and the Reformed Heidelberg Catechism. See William W. Schumacher, “Unionism and Syncretism in the LCMS Constitution: Historical Context and Interpretive Development,” in *Witness & Worship in Pluralistic America*, ed. John F. Johnson (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 2003), 52.

the General Synod (founded in 1820), who wanted Lutherans to have a voice that would be fraternal toward other Protestants.<sup>5</sup> In 1838, he appealed for an “apostolic Protestant union,” an ecumenical proposal for all Protestants in America to join together in working for the promotion of Christianity. In particular, Schmucker believed this approach would mean greater effectiveness in reaching out to the ever-growing number of immigrants in America, many of whom were not affiliated with any church. In keeping with this spirit, in 1839 the Foreign Mission Society of the General Synod proposed a union with the German Reformed Church in America.<sup>6</sup>

The General Synod engaged in relationships with a number of non-Lutheran churches at several levels. This included the exchanging of delegates with other church bodies, altar and pulpit fellowship, and joint participation in tract societies, mission societies, Sunday School unions, and more. For example, in the 1820s and 1830s the General Synod received as advisory members pastors from the Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and German Reformed churches. In return, pastors of the General Synod were received as advisory members (delegates) of the Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and German Reformed churches. The Lord’s Supper was celebrated jointly by the Lutherans and others at some of these gatherings. At the same time, Lutherans from the General Synod preached in Methodist and Reformed congregations. Consideration was given to a joint hymnal project between the Lutheran and Reformed churches. In 1845 the General Synod in its convention officially sanctioned the celebration of the Lord’s Supper with other churches as well as the exchanging of members. Likewise, ministers in good standing were authorized to pass from one body to another upon application and receipt of a certificate of ministerial standing.<sup>7</sup>

Schmucker’s vision of “American Lutheranism” was one that saw a form of Lutheranism based on the Augsburg Confession as the foundation and key to greater Protestant unity in America. However, his *Definite Synodical Platform* of 1855 included the “American Recension of the

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<sup>5</sup> The delegates at the founding meeting of the General Synod could agree only that the Synod would be Lutheran in name, and they made no identification at all with the historic Lutheran confessions.

<sup>6</sup> Adolph Spaeth, *Charles Porterfield Krauth*, 2 vols. (New York: Christian Literature Co, 1898), 1:332.

<sup>7</sup> *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Convention of the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States, Convened in Philadelphia, May 16, 1845* (Baltimore: Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1845), 30.

Augsburg Confession," which deleted "errors" from the Augustana and defended their recension.<sup>8</sup> The document proposed that this revision be the new standard of faith, a new confession, for the General Synod. This move was a decisive attempt to halt the increasing influence of the Lutheran Confessional Revival in the General Synod.

Lutherans recently emigrated from the German lands often saw the position of the General Synod to be un-Lutheran and quickly saw commonalities—especially with regard to doctrine and practice—between it and the union churches in Germany. Many of these Lutheran immigrants were influenced by the Confessional Revival to some degree, and they often decried the situation in the American churches as similar to that which they had fled in Europe. Their chief goal was to maintain a pure confession of faith and to preserve the Lutheran Church; thus, opposition to unionism in American churches was the natural result.

Some Lutherans in America were influenced in their views of the church by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), for whom the church was, above all, a fellowship, or *Gemeinschaft*, of believers. If the church was essentially an association of people, it was based on common piety or ethics. Whereas Luther had derived his understanding of fellowship from what the church is, namely a *koinonia* called together by the Holy Spirit, Schleiermacher derived his understanding of the church from what fellowship is, a community of like-minded believers voluntarily acting together. This view would not necessarily regard the church as a community of saints under one head, Christ. Schleiermacher's understanding of the church held sway among many in American Lutheranism at the time (as it still does today). In short, the General Synod's basis for fellowship and unity was its understanding of church as an association related to religion or piety, whereas the future Missouri Synod would see the basis for fellowship and unity as the understanding of church as the congregation of saints gathered by the Holy Spirit, believers in Christ, among whom the word of God is purely preached and the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution (AC VII). Certainly, this fundamental difference in the understanding of the church impacted the question of relationships among Lutherans in America at the time. It was predicated upon the different interpretations of both the Scriptures and the Lutheran

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Kurtz (1795–1865) also had a role in the drafting and was a champion of the *Definite Synodical Platform*. He was a pastor in Maryland and president of the General Synod for a time. He too was a strong exponent of the General Synod's "American Lutheranism."



Confessions, as well as differing understandings of what it meant to hold to the Scriptures and the Confessions as a Lutheran church.

## II. Developments at the Eve of the Formation of the LCMS

In 1845, less than two years before the organization of the Missouri Synod, three of the key figures in its early history—Wyneken, Sihler, and Walther—each took a firm stand against unionism and syncretism in American Lutheranism. Each of their efforts highlights some of the key reasons why the renunciation of the blending of churches and the blending of doctrines across confessional lines would be included in the Missouri Synod's constitution. And their positions say something even more significant about the Synod's early understanding of the church and its confession.

### *Wyneken and the General Synod*

In 1843, Friedrich Conrad Dieterich Wyneken published his influential booklet *The Distress of German Lutherans in North America*.<sup>9</sup> In addition to raising the alarm about the critical need for pastors and missionaries for service among German immigrants on the American frontier, Wyneken also decried the poor conditions of the churches in America. Associated at the time with the General Synod,<sup>10</sup> Wyneken criticized the indifference in doctrine and practice he observed in the Synod as well as increasing influences of unionism and revivalism within it. That message struck a chord with Lutherans in Germany, and several theological journals there attacked the General Synod for encouraging the union of Lutheran and Reformed churches in America. Although intended for audiences in Germany, Wyneken's booklet was also published in the United States in 1844 and soon gained the attention of—as well as a determined response from—the leaders of the General Synod.

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<sup>9</sup> F.C.D. Wyneken, *Die Noth der deutschen Lutheraner in Nordamerika: Ihren Glaubensgenossen in der Heimath an's Herz gelegt* (Besonderer Abdruck aus der Zeitschrift für Protestantismus und Kirche, herausgegeben von Professor D. Adolf von Harless, Februarheft 1843) (Erlangen: Theodor Bläsing, 1843). The work was also published in the United States the following year: *Die Noth der deutschen Lutheraner in Nordamerika*, ed. Friedrich Schmidt (Pittsburg: Druckerei der Lutherische Kirchenzeitung, 1844). See also *The Distress of the German Lutherans in North America*, trans. S. Edgar Schmidt, ed. Rudolph Rehmer (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> Wyneken was a member of the new Evangelical Synod of the West, which was part of the greater General Synod.

In 1845, Wyneken was an elected delegate to the General Synod convention. Arriving several days after the convention had begun, Wyneken found that the Synod had already passed a resolution requesting one of its committees to defend the General Synod against his accusations.<sup>11</sup> The Synod maintained that the charges of unionism, heterodox doctrine, and erring practice were false and that Wyneken had deliberately instigated the issue. In response, Wyneken, on the last day of the meeting, proposed an alternate resolution to the convention. He suggested that the General Synod send its official writings—including the works of its theologians Schmucker and Kurtz, copies of its newspapers, theological journals, and other books in which the doctrine and practice of the Synod were presented—to Lutheran theologians and journal editors in Germany. Let them scrutinize and so confirm the orthodoxy of the Synod before the Lutheran Church there! The General Synod, not wanting to deal with Wyneken’s proposal, tabled it. Wyneken then offered a second proposal that called on the General Synod publicly to condemn all the aforementioned official writings, including the works of Schmucker and Kurtz, and renounce them as heretical and aberrant teachings.<sup>12</sup>

In order to defend itself against those questioning its theological position, the leaders of the General Synod drafted a letter to the Evangelical (Union) churches in Germany. The letter, signed by Schmucker, Kurtz, and other theologians, informed the Germans that, in effect, the General Synod stood on common ground with the Union Church of Germany. The leaders of the General Synod considered this relationship with the German

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<sup>11</sup> *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Convention of the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States Convened in Philadelphia, May 16, 1845*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> The minutes of the General Synod meeting do not record Wyneken’s proposals. However, the official journal, *Hirtenstimme*, reported that “Pastor Wyneken of Baltimore spoke out on a number of occasions against the doctrine, practices, books and newspapers of the Lutheran Church and threatened to give evidence of the same.” It added that, when Wyneken made his first proposal of sending printed materials to the Germans for scrutiny, Schmucker, Kurtz, and the others, “listened good-naturedly to this funny notion and tabled it.” (Theodore Engelder, “Why Missouri Stood Alone,” *Ebenezer: Reviews of the Work of the Missouri Synod during Three Quarters of a Century*, ed. W. H. T. Dau [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922], 113.) In addition, Wyneken himself published a description of the events at the Synod meeting in the *Lutherische Kirchenzeitung* 7 (1845): 92. See Johann Christoph Wilhelm Lindemann, *A Biographical Sketch of the Honorable American Evangelist Friedrich Conrad Dieterich Wyneken*, trans. James P. Lanning (Fort Wayne: Walther Library, Concordia Theological Seminary, 1995), 20–21, and Walter A. Baepler, *A Century of Grace: A History of the Missouri Synod 1847–1947* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), 62–63.

churches so important that several of the leaders, including Schmucker and Kurtz, traveled to Germany to deliver the letter in person.<sup>13</sup>

After the scene at the May 1845 convention, Wyneken withdrew from the General Synod. He regarded his own actions against the Synod in almost militant terms. In a letter to Löhe, he expressed his feelings about the situation:

As an honest man and a Christian, I wished to declare war against her [the General Synod], although it may seem silly to her since I am only one insignificant individual. I desired to tell her in advance that I would do all in my power to oppose her influence, especially that I would warn against her, so that the few in Germany who are on the side of the truth do not bother with her.<sup>14</sup>

On receiving Wyneken's letter, Löhe remarked: "Wyneken is herewith beginning a war which he may carry on with the deepest peace of soul, a war in which all true children of the Lutheran Church will have to join him."<sup>15</sup>

Wyneken's stand, then, highlights what happens to the church's confession under unionistic and syncretistic influences. Genuine Lutheran doctrine and practice are diminished, error results, and the church is harmed. The fact that these problems were occurring not only in the German churches but also within synods in America raised serious questions among many Lutheran immigrants. Repudiating unionism and syncretism and their effects would become a matter not only of importance but of urgency among those who would found the new Missouri Synod.

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<sup>13</sup> The letter was published in Germany in the *Zeitschrift für Protestantismus und Kirche* 11, no. 4. Löhe also published a report on the General Synod's letter, noting the visit of the General Synod leaders to Germany. Löhe added that the letter intended to defend the Synod against the accusation of laxity (*Laxheit*) in doctrine and confession but failed to accomplish its objective and rather confirmed the perception about the unionistic tendencies in the Synod (*Kirchliche Mittheilungen aus und über Nord-Amerika* 6 [1846]: 48).

<sup>14</sup> Georg J. Fritschel, *Quellen und Dokumente zur Geschichte und Lehrstellung der ev.-luth. Synode von Iowa u. a. Staaten* (Chicago: Wartburg Press, n.d.), 44; citation in translation from Baepler, *A Century of Grace*, 61–62.

<sup>15</sup> Fritschel, *Quellen und Dokumente*, 61–62.

*Sihler and the Guiding Principles for Establishing Orthodox Synods of the Lutheran Church*

In September 1845, representatives of the Lutherans from Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio, along with Wyneken himself, met in Cleveland to discuss their future plans. At that meeting, nine pastors, including Wilhelm Sihler and Johann Adam Ernst, signed a "Document of Separation," stating their withdrawal from the Ohio Synod and the reasons for it. The men perceived that the Ohio Synod held to a lax confessional position and engaged in unionistic practices, especially with regard to the sacraments.<sup>16</sup> The Ohio Synod's refusal to address the concerns of these pastors caused them grief, yet they maintained that they were compelled to leave for the sake of their consciences.<sup>17</sup> Officially, at this point, these men were no longer a part of any synod or church body. Not surprisingly, they desired to organize a new synod that would be truly Lutheran.

In December 1845, Wilhelm Sihler stepped further into the fray. He published an article in *Der Lutheraner* that gives insights into his thinking about the state of American Lutheranism at the time. In the article, Sihler described the conditions of the Lutheran churches in America and tackled the problem of organizing a true Lutheran synod in a country where, in contrast to the German lands, the separation of church and state was the norm. Clearly, it would be impossible to transplant an ecclesiastical

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<sup>16</sup> At the time, the Ohio Synod did not pledge its ordinands to the Lutheran Confessions. The official agenda of the Synod, in particular, some of its formulas for the administration of the Lord's Supper and Confession and Absolution, were perceived to be Calvinistic. In addition, the Ohio Synod permitted its pastors to serve Reformed congregations or joint Reformed-Lutheran congregations. At the same time, the signers of the "Document of Separation" protested the encroachment of English and the displacement of the German language in the Ohio Synod seminary in Columbus. The text of the "Document of Separation," including the names of the subscribers, is translated and printed in *Moving Frontiers: Readings in the History of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, ed. Carl S. Meyer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 143-146. Sihler originally published the document in Pittsburgh in the *Lutherische Kirchenzeitung* 21 (December 13, 1845). That the document and the concerns raised in it about unionistic practices in the Ohio Synod were a matter of importance for Lutherans in America is demonstrated by that fact that the text was reprinted by both Walther in *Der Lutheraner* 2, no. 11 (1846): 42-43 and Löhe in his *Kirchliche Mittheilungen aus und über Nord-Amerika* 4, no. 2 (1846): 4-8.

<sup>17</sup> Writing in 1851, Sihler said, "God is my witness that my testimony against the Ohio Synod sprang from honest zeal for the honor of God and the welfare of the Church. If synod had received our first request with only some measure of good will, the whole situation to-day might be different." (Quoted in Engelder, "Why Missouri Stood Alone," 116.)

structure into the American landscape as it had been established by the governments in Germany. Lutherans in America faced numerous challenges, Sihler observed, among them the temptation to enter a union with the Reformed under the pressures of modernity (including the union on the basis of mutual love) and doctrinal indifference. Due to the ignorance of some Lutherans, false teaching had entered the churches, Lutherans were unable to defend their own doctrines, and the truth unto salvation was being abandoned. Sihler noted especially the influence of Reformed theology on the Lutheran doctrines of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, in which cases the Lutheran teaching was often diminished or lost.<sup>18</sup> He added that nearly half of the Lutherans in America, and almost all the English-speaking Lutherans, belonged to the "so-called" Lutheran General Synod. Sihler explained that while its origins were in a church that had once held fast to the true teachings of the Lutheran Confessions and once had the true teaching on the sacraments and the Office of the Keys, it had now fallen away and taken up the impure teaching of the Reformed and the Methodists. At the same time, the General Synod had yielded wholeheartedly to the movement toward the false union so prevalent at the time. Sihler minced no words: in this falsehood Satan himself poses as an "angel of light." This temptation, Sihler maintained, "our church" must resist by the grace of God, and, as the bearer of the pure word and sacraments, it must shake itself out of its slumber and keep watch against this threat. He noted that other Lutheran synods not connected to the General Synod also professed publicly to hold to the Lutheran Confessions yet did not practice in accord with that teaching, instead using Reformed or Evangelical formulas for the administration of the sacraments. Sihler asserted that the problem with these churches was the failure to adhere to Lutheran doctrine and practice:

Again, a part of these synods pledges itself outwardly to the entire confessions of the Lutheran church, yet does not require firm subscription to them at ordination, adheres to a Reformed and United formula for the administration of the Lord's Supper, distributes also the Lord's Supper without discretion to Reformed and Evangelicals and thus promotes the shameful unionism and church mixing [*Unirerei und Kirchenmengerei*] of our day. But the worst thing is that they [the unionistic synods] reject the earnest pleas of some of their

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<sup>18</sup> In particular, Sihler was concerned about the language used in the distribution formula for the Lord's Supper. The Ohio Synod authorized a formula which included in the words of institution the phrase, "Christus spricht" ("Christ said [this is my body...]"). This same phrase was used in the Prussian Union agenda in an attempt to find common ground between Lutheran and Reformed teachings on the Lord's Supper.

members for correction of the problem and for the preservation and aid of the church even in the most desperate state, and thus in any case will remain in confessional indifference and indolence.<sup>19</sup>

Sihler's 1845 stand, then, emphasized that the true unity of the church is destroyed by the very thing claiming to bring unity: the forging of church union on the basis of something other than agreement in true doctrine. Sihler's influence in the conception of Missouri Synod polity and his identification of the dangers facing a true Lutheran church in America are significant. His concerns about unionism and syncretism would eventually be expressed in the Missouri Synod's constitution.<sup>20</sup>

### *Walther and the True Church*

In late May 1845, the same month as Wyneken's stand at the General Synod convention, Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther was engaged in a series of heated written exchanges with a German Reformed pastor in St. Louis.<sup>21</sup> The pastor, E.L. Nollau, had written a pamphlet defending the union churches in Germany and stating that Walther's critique in *Der Lutheraner* of the union movement represented "a narrow-minded, unevangelical, and dubious bias." The attack got personal: Walther was reproached for his "pharisaical arrogance," and for being "unscrupulous" and "intolerant." Then the gloves came off as Nollau started in about

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<sup>19</sup> Sihler, "Welches sind die leitenden Grundsätze zur Bildung rechtgläubiger Synoden der luth. Kirche in hiesigen Landen?" *Der Lutheraner* 2, no. 8 (1845): 29; author's translation.

<sup>20</sup> The 1846 draft constitution includes a section at the end titled "Erläuterungen," or explanations of certain articles of the constitution. In this section, an explanation is given for Article V, §14 stating that the Synod stands in accord with Augsburg Confession, Article VII, that uniformity in ceremonies is not essential. However, the Synod noted that it deemed uniformity in ceremonies wholesome and useful, lest the weak stumble, so that the appearance of innovation may be avoided, and because of the situation in American Lutheranism where the Reformed influence on ceremonies was pronounced. This article and the lengthy explanation appended to the 1846 draft (which was also printed in *Der Lutheraner* 3, no. 2 [1846]: 9) seem to reflect closely the sentiments of Sihler in his article on the guiding principles for the establishment of a synod. (Cf. "[Erläuterung zu] Cap. V. §14 'gedrungen wird' [3]," *Die Verfassung der deutschen evangelisch-lutherischen Synode von Missouri, Ohio und anderen Staaten 1846*, 12–13.)

<sup>21</sup> C.F.W. Walther, "Antwort auf die neueste Vertheidigung der Union," *Der Lutheraner* 1 (1845): 78–80, 82–84, 86–88, 95–96, 97–100; 2 (1846): 11–12, 26–28, 47–48, 51–52.

Martin Stephan and how more spiritual tyrants like him were in the offing.<sup>22</sup>

Walther replied with a series of nine articles against this most recent advocate of the union. He explained that the Evangelical Lutheran Church was the true catholic church on earth, while the Reformed Church was not part of the true church but, rather, a sect. It had separated itself from the true church and had institutionalized its unique identity by its false doctrine.<sup>23</sup> Union of the Lutheran and Reformed churches would result in error, false doctrine, and sectarianism. At the same time, Walther stressed, the goal is the preaching and hearing of the pure teaching of the Gospel, regardless of the name of the earthly church:

Our objective is not to ensure that all Christians accept a so-called Lutheran church order and Lutheran ceremonies, that they assemble themselves into a Lutheran synod, call themselves Lutheran and subscribe to the Lutheran Symbols, whether they take them to heart or not. No, we are not fighting for an external structure with a “Lutheran” signboard on the front. The object of our struggle is nothing other than the true faith, the pure truth, the unadulterated gospel, the genuine foundation of the apostles and the prophets, where Jesus Christ is the Cornerstone—the jewel entrusted to the true church of all times—which she has handed down to us through the centuries and often preserved with the shedding of streams of her blood, and is now entrusted also to us.<sup>24</sup>

Walther continued to articulate his understanding of the nature of the church in the years that followed. Developed on the basis of his theses presented at the Altenburg Debate in 1841, Walther drew up nine theses on the church in 1851 to refute the attacks of J.A.A. Grabau.<sup>25</sup> The Missouri Synod approved Walther’s theses on *Kirche und Amt* as “the voice of our church on the question of church and office.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Walther, “Antwort auf die neueste Vertheidigung der Union,” 1 (1845): 78–80.

<sup>23</sup> Walther, “Antwort auf die neueste Vertheidigung der Union,” 1 (1845): 99.

<sup>24</sup> Walther, “Antwort auf die neueste Vertheidigung der Union,” 1 (1845): 100; author’s translation.

<sup>25</sup> Johannes Andreas August Grabau (1804–1879), the head of the Buffalo Synod, opposed Walther and the Missouri Synod on the doctrines of the church and the ministry. Grabau maintained that the proper organization for a Lutheran synod should include pastoral supremacy and a centralized form of government.

<sup>26</sup> “Die Stimme unserer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt,” as Walther entitled his exposition of the theses in book form in 1852.

The eighth of Walther's theses "On the Church" (*Von der Kirche*) includes a discussion of the relationship of Christians and the Christian church to heterodox churches or sects, and considerations for fellowship or separation:

Although God gathers for Himself a holy church of elect at a place where His Word is not taught in its complete purity and the Sacraments are not administered altogether according to the institution of Jesus Christ, if only God's Word and the Sacraments are not denied entirely but both essentially remain, nevertheless every believer is bound, at the peril of losing his salvation, to flee all false teachers, avoid all heterodox congregations or sects, and confess and adhere to orthodox congregations and their orthodox preachers wherever such may be found.<sup>27</sup>

Walther maintains in this thesis, and in his further exposition of it, that children of God may be found in churches that are heterodox, or even heretical, and also that the true church remains there in the pure preaching of God's word and administration of the sacraments. Nevertheless, Walther emphasizes that Christians must, for the sake of their own salvation, flee from all false prophets and avoid fellowship with heterodox congregations or sects. At the same time, Christians, for the sake of their salvation, are obliged to acknowledge orthodox congregations and remain with their orthodox preachers. Walther explains in his exposition of the thesis that this teaching is the command of God, who "in His holy Word commands us to flee and avoid false teachers and their false worship."<sup>28</sup> True confession of faith in Christ and rejection of the perversion of God's word is essential: "Hence, every Christian is in duty bound, at the peril of losing his salvation, publicly to renounce [*loszusagen*]<sup>29</sup> those who, as he knows, pervert Christ's Word and publicly to acknowledge and adhere to those who, he knows, publicly witness to Christ and His truth."<sup>30</sup> Walther also stresses that "God's Word also declares very emphatically that a

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<sup>27</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *The Church and the Office of the Ministry. The Voice of Our Church on the Question of Church and Office*, trans. John T. Mueller, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 91.

<sup>28</sup> Walther, *The Church and The Office of The Ministry*, 106. Walther has an extensive list of Scripture passages supporting this teaching, including Deut 13:1-3, Matt 7:15, Matt 24:23-24, Acts 20:30-31, and Rom 16:17-18.

<sup>29</sup> This is an infinitive form of the verb related to the noun [*Lossagung*] used in Article II, §3 of the 1847 Constitution. See the text of the Constitution below.

<sup>30</sup> Walther, *The Church and the Office of the Ministry*, 127.



Christian should have fellowship with those who confess the true faith and beware of causing divisions and schisms, be it by word or deed.”<sup>31</sup>

Even while the immediate purpose of writing *Kirche und Amt* was to refute the arguments of Grabau, this summary of Walther’s position may be seen, at least in part, as a further explanation of what was intended in the 1847 constitution. The fact that the Synod in convention endorsed Walther’s theses on *Kirche und Amt* just a few years after the constitution was adopted is another matter to be considered. Walther provides a theological analysis of the question of fellowship with heterodox or heretical congregations even while he does not describe in detail the situation in American Lutheranism. Walther’s stand, then, highlights the nature of the church as God’s holy church, the true church, where God’s word is preached and taught in purity and where his sacraments are administered according to the institution of Jesus Christ.

The experiences of Wyneken, Sihler, and Walther in 1845 were only a small part of the making of these men as pastors, theologians, and churchmen. Yet, in the stands they took against what they regarded as unionistic and syncretistic tendencies in American churches, we can see how they were developing their conceptions of the relationship between the church and its confession. Founded on God’s word, the Lutheran Church could not depart from that word and still remain a true church. Striving to preach and teach God’s word in purity, it could not permit another word (e.g., rationalism or doctrinal indifference) to take hold in the church. Recognizing that true unity in the church is that which God establishes, it could not allow itself to become a false union. Wyneken, Sihler, and Walther knew that holding fast to the word of God and embracing the Lutheran Confessions in word and deed was the key to the survival of the Lutheran church in America. This was the way to safeguard the true unity of the true church.

### III. The Drafting of the First Missouri Synod Constitution

Having established contact with the Saxon Lutherans in Missouri, representatives of the Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio group traveled to St. Louis in May 1846 to discuss the possibility of organizing a new synod.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Walther, *The Church and the Office of the Ministry*, 127. Walther again offers a series of Scripture texts in support of this teaching, e.g., 1 Cor 1:10–13, Eph 4:3–6, and 1 John 2:19.

<sup>32</sup> Representing the Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio pastors at this meeting were: W. Sihler, J.A. Ernst, and F.J.C. Lochner; and representing the Saxons in Missouri were: J. F.

At this meeting, the joint parties, working for an entire week on the project, produced a draft of a synod constitution and made copies for distribution and review by both groups.<sup>33</sup> C.F.W. Walther also published the full text of the draft constitution in *Der Lutheraner*, the Lutheran newspaper in St. Louis of which he was the editor.<sup>34</sup> The draft constitution produced at this May 1846 meeting is important because it became the foundational document, with only minor revisions, for the constitution adopted by the Synod the following year.<sup>35</sup> The two groups of Lutherans met again in Fort Wayne in July 1846. This meeting allowed additional representatives of the Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio Lutherans to meet the Saxons from Missouri and to participate in the discussions regarding the draft constitution and the proposed organization of a synod. Finally, on April 26, 1847, twelve pastors representing fifteen German Lutheran congregations from Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan met in

Buenger, O. Fuerbringer, G.H. Loeber, E.G.W. Keyl, T.C.F. Gruber, and C.F.W. Walther. For Lochner's description of the visit and the meetings, see "Rev. F. Lochner's Report on His First Contacts with the Saxons," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1934): 77-81, and *Moving Frontiers*, 146-148.

<sup>33</sup> After the meeting in St. Louis, pastors Lochner and Craemer, and others who were still members of the Michigan Synod, attended the meetings of the Michigan Synod, which had resolved to draft its own constitution. Lochner, after consulting with his fellow Löhe emissaries, presented his copy of the draft constitution from the St. Louis meeting to the Michigan Synod for discussion. The members of the Michigan Synod reviewed the St. Louis draft by individual paragraph. However, Lochner reports that the draft was not well received: "In the debate on such paragraphs as confession [the confessional basis], the relation to heretical groups, serving mixed congregations, confessional ceremonies, etc., not only did the ignorance of some members become apparent, but also, more and more, the un-Lutheran, unionistic attitude of the synod. Finally the discussions were dropped. . ." ("Rev. F. Lochner's Report on His First Contacts with the Saxons," 81). It seems clear that many of the members of the Michigan Synod did not share the views of Lochner (and others from the Löhe group) concerning the confessional basis, unionistic practices, and heterodox teachings. At that meeting of the Michigan Synod, pastors Lochner, Craemer, and others presented their own declaration of separation from the Michigan Synod.

<sup>34</sup> *Der Lutheraner* 3, no. 1 (1846): 2-6. The draft constitution was also published as a separate document in St. Louis: *Die Verfassung der deutschen evangelisch-lutherischen Synode von Missouri, Ohio und anderen Staaten* (St. Louis: Weber & Ohlshausen, 1846).

<sup>35</sup> Gustave Polack has provided side-by-side English translations (prepared at the time by Concordia Historical Institute assistant curate Roy Suelflow) of both the May 1846 draft constitution and the 1847 constitution adopted by the Synod. The texts reveal no differences between the two documents in regard to Article II, §3; however, Polack's translation of the 1846 draft does not include the footnote discussed below. Gustave Polack, "Our First Synodical Constitution," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1943): 1-18.

Chicago and formally founded the new Synod. At this first convention the constitution was approved and adopted.

The pertinent text from the constitution is provided below, both in the original constitution of 1847 and in its most recent form.

<i>1847 Constitution</i> <i>Article II, §3</i>	<i>2013 Constitution</i> <i>Article VI, §2</i>
<p>Separation from all com- mixture of Church or faith, as, for example, serving of mixed congregations by a servant of the Church; taking part in the service and Sacraments of heretical mixed congregations; taking part in any heretical tract distribution and mission projects, etc.<sup>36</sup></p>	<p>Renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description, such as:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Serving congregations of mixed confession, as such, by ministers of the church;</li> <li>b. Taking part in the ser- vices and sacramental rites of heterodox con- gregations or of con- gregations of mixed confession;</li> <li>c. Participating in heterodox tract and missionary activities.<sup>37</sup></li> </ol>

The conditions for membership in the Synod Constitution, including the clause renouncing unionism and syncretism, reflect some of the original reasons for forming the Synod. The Synod was founded to ensure, for example, “The preservation and furthering of the unity of the pure confession (Eph. 4:3–6; 1 Cor. 1:10) and to provide common defense against separatism and sectarianism (Rom. 16:17)” (Article I, §2). In

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<sup>36</sup> Polack, “Our First Synodical Constitution,” 3. The original German text for this portion of the 1847 constitution is as follows: “Lossagung von aller Kirchen- und Glaubensmengerei, als da ist: Das Bedienen gemischter Gemeinden, als solcher, von Seiten der Diener der Kirche; Theilnahme an dem Gottesdienst und den Sacraments-handlungen falschgläubiger und gemischter Gemeinden, Theilnahme an allem falschgläubigen Traktaten- und Missionswesen, u.s.w.” *Die Verfassung der deutschen evangelisch-lutherischen Synode von Missouri, Ohio und anderen Staaten*, (St. Louis, 1847). The original document is in the archives at the Concordia Historical Institute.

<sup>37</sup> The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Handbook: Constitution, Bylaws, Articles of Incorporation* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2013), 15.

addition, the clause corresponds with several of the functions of the Synod laid out in Article IV; to cite only the first, "1. To stand guard over the purity and unity of doctrine within the synodical circle, and to oppose false doctrine."<sup>38</sup>

A careful examination of how the clause requiring the renunciation of "Kirchen- und Glaubensmengerei" is placed in the Synod Constitution is instructive. The positioning of the clause within the list of conditions for membership in the Synod is noteworthy since it is the immediate context of the clause. The series of paragraphs begins with the confessional basis of the Synod: first, acceptance of the Scriptures as the written word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and life, and second, acceptance of the Lutheran confessional writings as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the word of God. Immediately following this doctrinal basis of the Synod is the renunciation of unionism and syncretism, the serving of mixed congregations, and the participation in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox or mixed congregations, heterodox tract and mission societies, etc. Subsequent to this clause is the pledge to use doctrinally pure church books, such as agendas, hymnals, and catechisms. The overarching concern expressed in this listing of conditions is the maintenance of pure Lutheran doctrine and practice. This pledge pertains both to the individual level (congregations and pastors) and to the corporate level (the Synod), which is an expression of the church's unity.

What are the underlying reasons for the conditions? The drafters of the constitution are not explicit in their reasoning here; however, certain factors are clear. First, the confessional basis sets down the doctrinal standard of the Synod. Subscription to the Confessions is unconditional. As C.F.W. Walther made clear, the object of this subscription is the doctrinal content of the Confessions:

An unconditional subscription is the solemn declaration which the individual who wants to serve the Church makes under oath 1) that he accepts the doctrinal content of our Symbolical Books, because he recognizes the fact that it is in full agreement with Scripture and does not militate against Scripture in any point, whether that point be of major or minor importance; 2) that he therefore heartily believes in this divine truth and is determined to preach this doctrine without adulteration. Whatever position any doctrine may occupy in the doctrinal system of the Symbols, whatever the form may be in which

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<sup>38</sup> Quotations are from the 1847 Synod constitution (Polack, "Our First Synodical Constitution," 2-3).

it occurs, whether the subject be dealt with *ex professo* or only incidentally, an unconditional subscription refers to the whole content of the Symbols and does not allow the subscriber to make any mental reservation in any point. Nor will he exclude such doctrines as are discussed incidentally in support of other doctrines, because the fact that they are so used stamps them as irrevocable articles of faith and demands their joyful acceptance by everyone who subscribes to the Symbols.<sup>39</sup>

The concern about the renunciation of unionism and syncretism is consistent with the unconditional nature of the confessional subscription required in the Synod. Members (congregations, pastors, et al.) pledge to hold to the confessional basis of the Synod; failure to keep the conditions automatically means a violation of the confessional basis. The concern here is perhaps less about unionism and syncretism per se, and more about what unionism and syncretism do, namely, effect the intrusion of false teaching and practice into the church even while claiming to establish unity in it.

True acceptance, then, of the Scriptures and the Confessions as stipulated in the confessional basis means the renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description. In turn, the renunciation of unionism and syncretism helps to safeguard the confessional basis, even as it flows out of it. In the case of a pastor, engaging in unionistic behaviors and embracing syncretistic teachings also means the violation of his ordination vows, which include acceptance of the confessional basis. At that point, the nature of the problem extends beyond Synod fellowship and involves a conflict with the word of God.

The Synod and its members cannot engage in false unity because such is contrary to the word of God, harms the consciences of the weak, and threatens the true gospel in the church. In addition, such activity violates the unity of the pure confession of the Synod as well as its trust.

#### IV. Conclusion

The founders of the Missouri Synod took seriously the question of the unity of the true Christian church. They knew the one church is the body of Christ, and they knew the true church was founded on the word of God.

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<sup>39</sup> C.F.W. Walther, "Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church: Essay Delivered at the Western District Convention in 1858," translated and condensed by Alex Wm. C. Guebert, *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18 (1947): 242.

The founders of the Synod also took seriously the question of the church's doctrine—the true testimony of the Scriptures. There could not be disagreeing doctrines in the one, true church, and for that reason they handled carefully questions of unity in the church and fellowship with those who embraced a confession contrary to their own. The chief problem with *Kirchen- und Glaubensmengerei* was not simply that it was rationalistic or indifferentistic but that it was theologically wrong. It was against God's word and against the Lutheran confessional writings.

Clearly, the founders of the Synod were not afraid of union or fellowship with others; they actively sought it out and forged it in the organization of the Synod in 1847. For decades afterwards, they continued to strive for unity among the various Lutheran churches. What they sought to avoid, however, was union at the expense of pure doctrine and practice in keeping with that doctrine. They regarded unionism and syncretism as serious threats to the church and its teaching as well as to the faith and life of its members.

Perhaps the greatest threat of unionism was the forging of "unity" on the basis of something other than pure doctrine. Syncretism aided this process, along with doctrinal indifference. Such "unity" was not true unity in the church because it was not grounded in what the church truly is, namely, the body of believers in Christ among whom the word of God is purely preached and the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution. If the intention or motivation for involvement with other churches was to forge union on the basis of something other than agreement in doctrine, then the response of the Synod's founders to that involvement was clear: avoid the erring brother, lest we compromise the true teaching of God's word. If the intention was to bear witness to the truth of God's word and the gospel, then they endeavored to reach those who taught contrary to that word so that they might have a positive influence. Nevertheless, the teaching of God's word must never be compromised.

At its founding, the Synod strove to bear witness to the truth of God's word and to establish true unity where possible. If true unity could not be attained, the Synod, to some extent, used the same approach with other Lutheran or non-Lutheran groups that it used within itself as it relied on the power of God's word to convince them. Refuting false teachings and practices might be necessary, but it was God's word to which the appeal was made. This effort was born out of sincere conviction that Christians, as the body of Christ, are called to proclaim God's word, to teaching and practice in accord with that word, and to a persuasion based on and informed by it alone.