

Church History

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Thesis: Was the Missouri Synod Charge of
Unionism in the Wisconsin Synod in the 1860's
Completely Justifiable on the Basis of
Historical Evidence?

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This paper will deal with the matter of how bad the early Wisconsin Synod really was. We hear stories by Missouri Synod men that if it would not have been for the conservative Missouri Synod the Wisconsin Synod would never have stayed on the straight and narrow. Many of us in the Wisconsin Synod look upon our past history as the "bleakest hour" in our history. But is this all true? Does the historical record bear out the early accusations by the Missouri Synod? Just how justifiable were their charges of unionism? This paper will attempt to answer: Was the Missouri Synod's Charge of Unionism in the Wisconsin Synod in the 1860's Completely Justifiable on the Basis of Historical Evidence?

Some areas that we shall cover will be: 1. The charges made against us; 2. The unionism in the Wisconsin Synod; 3. Wisconsin Synod's confessionalism; 4. And the conclusions we can draw from all this evidence.

The Missouri Synod laid some serious and strong charges against us. Here are some of them: "They have learned from the union, to recognize confessions that conflict with their own, (84); Now then, since we decidedly cannot recognize the Synod of Wisconsin as a genuine Lutheran Synod but, in spite of its appeal to the Symbolical Books, must look upon it as an un-Lutheran, syncretistic synod, faithful neither to God nor man, we could in conscience not do otherwise, etc.. May this testimony against the synod, called forth by the vindication to which we have been forced, itself be a contributing factor to move it to

(note: all reference pages are taken from , The History of the Wisconsin Synod: J. P Koehler. St. Cloud, Minnesota: Sentinel Publ. Co.. 1970.)

purge itself thoroughly of its indetermination, its syncretism, and its un-Lutheran and pseudo-Lutheran elements in general, so so its relationship to our Synod under divine blessing may finally become as it should be, (86): But the Wisconsin Synod, by and large, has a unionistic tendency. There is, indeed, in her ranks a faction that favors a more Lutheran practice, but those are only individuals, the ruling spirit in the body is different, as appears not only from its official association with unionistic German mission institutes but from its local church practice. Church discipline is just a term, (93); The 'Lutheran' Wisconsin Synod is a unionistic communion; for it accepts, among other things, preachers from the United Over-Kirchenrath in Prussia and has these preachers ordained by the United Prussian consistory before they are called by congregations, contrary to all sound Biblical, Lutheran doctrine and practice, " (108); and a sweeping generalization was made that if Mission Societies harbor false doctrine so must the Wisconsin Synod, (108)

These are the statements against us. Now let us look at our unionistic policy. First we have the policy of the Langenbuger Verein, who helped father the Wisconsin Synod. The society was made up of United, Reformed, and Lutheran boards. These men would train men to be missionaries and then send them to whatever areas requested men. The Missionaries were to remain ^{on} unrestrained as to their Reformed, Lutheran, or united Evangelical confession. As these men founded congregations every congregation was free to join the church body of its choice. The entire policy

of the Mission Society was more evangelical, than confessional, ie., they were more interested in conserving the Word among the people, and not interested in religious quarrels, (28) Pacificism, not confrontation in doctrinal matters.

In line with their policy, our Synod's earlier policy was simply this, we used their men to fill our pulpits; we accepted \$200.00 to support a Reispredigt, traveling preacher who would operate throughout the state of Wisconsin, (80); the men sent from Europe would periodically send back reports to their sponsors about their work and the state of church affairs. (75)

Looking at the societies' unionism, and the ties which the Wisconsin Synod maintained with the Verdangenberger, someone may immediately say, as the Missouri Synod often said, that we the Wisconsin Synod were unionistic; hence, if we justified maintainig these ties, we must practice unionism and adhere to false doctrine, just as the Society held to false doctrine. And this is what the Missouri Synod said.

For us to get the correct prospective on this matter we need to look at the overall practice of the Wisconsin Synod and we will learn that they were more confessional and non-unionistic in practice than normally credited with. This confessionalism can be seen in the constitution upon^{which} the Wisconsin Synod was first formed. I shall only mention its pertinent points: ch. 2, ordinations are approved only by two thirds^d of ordained ministers present; every candidate submits to an examination; chapter 5,

all liturgical acts are to be in accordance with book of agenda approved by Synod; ch. 6, each licensed candidate was to have two years probation, submit some sermons and a scholarly essay for examination by the Synod's president and the Ministerial Meeting; all candidates were pledged to U. Aug. Conf., and all other Evangelical-Lutheran Confessions. (40-41) Thus one can easily see that we made sure of our orthodoxy and the orthodoxy of our preachers, even those from United, or Reformed societies in Europe.

Let us however not neglect to see that not only in print but in practice also we were confessional in these matters.

In 1862 Pastor von Schmid at Theresa was dismissed from his office for espousing the church and ministry ideas of the Buffalo Synod. The Golden Lake congregation was refused Synod membership, for its constitution was not conforming to the Lutheran confessions. (83) Bading forbid our men to serve non-Synod congregations without the consent of Synod, (of course, this seems to have been done for expediency's sake and for peace, rather than for faithful ministry of the Gospel, (83) Sauer was told not to receive excommunicated Missouri Synod people until they got a legal church release, also he was told not to use the Lutheran and the Reformed confession in the Lord's Supper. (84) Lange disagreed with Synod's doctrine and practice. Being from a German mission society we see that some disagreed with our Synod's policies. And yet in due time they were dealt with by Synod's officials, (89)

In 1863 Synod advised its pastors not to use the un-Lutheran and rationalistic agendas of the Pennsylvania Synod, but to use good Lutheran hymn and liturgy books. (90) The Berlin society sent Giese,^e who soon left Synod, for he was opposed to doctrinal union but not corporate union. (91) Vorberg went back to Germany, for the Wisconsin Synod was getting too Lutheran. (91) We defended ourselves against accusations that we served Reformed congregations, (98); we would serve them if they desired to join us and accept Lutheranism. Hilbert and Denninger were told to stop their un-Lutheran practices. Laupp was expelled for the same reason, (109.) Moldehnke's protest of Bleeken's Freemasonry led to Bleeken's leaving the Wisconsin. (109) In 1865 two men from Europe left because of our stand on non-unionism, and one was expelled. (111)

All these various examples show that the Synod officials had control over it's pastors and their practices. But it also points out that many unfit men were sent to us by the mission societies.

In my reading I failed to find any instances during this period where we surrendered doctrine. The Wisconsin Synod could not be accused of being wishy-washy on the Word. If anyone practiced the exchanging of, or filling of pulpits of other church bodies, they were taken to task for such practices. So the Missouri Synod criticism that we were unionistic in practice is not as 100% true as they made out to believe. We did have some pastors who carried over unionistic ideas from Germany, and this points out one area where the mission societies caused us problems.

However one area in which we failed to follow strict Lutheran lines, and an area which the Missouri Synod had some justification in criticising us and calling us unionistic, is in the area of fiscal matters. Even after adopting the solid platform of a constitution for the Wisconsin Synod, Muchlhaeuser in 1850 adopted the unwise policy of soliciting funds from outsiders. (41-42)

As time went on in 1860, this unwise policy of accepting money from outsiders brought the Missouri Synod's censure down upon us. But even these monetary ties with Europe, \$200.00 a year, did not mean that the mission society gained any foothold in the policy making of the Wisconsin Synod.

However as time went on certain problems arose which caused the Wisconsin Synod much consternation due to these monetary ties. It is when these problems and pressures arose that our Synod saw that these relations could no longer be justified. Let us see how the situation changed. In its early policy we could not condone the unionism as practiced by the mission society, but its relationship to us as a synod was not that objectionable. But the Langenberger policy began to change. Instead of merely training men, and merely sending them here to join any confession, and not making any confessionable demands on our synod, a change in leadership in the society brought a change in policy. When Eichiler, Schuermann, and others took care of ^{the} mission projects in the society, they now began to conceive of "planting in the United States the United Church of the West." (92) Of course, this new policy makes quite clear that no longer was the Verlangenberger Verein going to let the Wisconsin Synod get too confessional

or Lutheran, otherwise we would become too exclusive, and their union men would not be welcomed in our pulpits, nor would we exchange pulpits. Confessionalism in its pastors was the last thing this mission society now wanted in its men. In the many letters written to our Synod this fear was all too clearly shown. "If we would not work with and service Union congregations: how could the union support us." (92) They were afraid we were going pro-Missouri, (92) They would withhold funds from Bading, (94). Our stand against Methodism was interfering with their collecting money among the Methodists, (94). After the Mantiowac Conference meeting the Langenberger wrote concerned letters expressing these thoughts: 1. individuals, not synod as a whole, getting too exclusive; 2. confessionalism should not stand in way of brotherly love; 3. quarrels among bodies are resolved only by joining together, and Christ will heal all wounds; 4. expected the men who were sent with spirit of love, not confessionalism, should be free to join others in same spirit of love; 5. blame for Wisconsin Synod confessional practices lies with the pastore, not the members; 6. if the society supplies meⁿ to Union, Reformed, and Lutheran churches, so the society should expect them to work side by side, (100-101). Other letters express the same criticism, (105,112,113,114.)

The mission society expressed great concern. And this concern they expressed to us because our policy of non-unionism conflicted with their new mission policy. They now put a lot of pressure on us, which before they did not do.

And there were other factors which made our previously,

partially excusable ties with them more questionable. We soon began to realize that our pastors needed a more thorough training than the missionary training by the Langenberger, (and I'm sure the need for a completely independant church was seen also in this area of ministerial training,) so that we began to look to European societies to provide us with money for building a seminary. (75) While the trend, even in 1863, was not to look so readily to Europe for men, still it was suggested that Bading be sent to Europe for money, (90). And the Langenberger urged us to come and solicit money, (91). This old trend to look to outsiders here again pops up. In money donations this policy payed off for us, to the sum of \$13,000. (104). But in it's repercussions it was not worth it. The Missouri Synod condemned us in print for unionism, (107). In fact because the mission societies entertained false doctrine in their midst, so the Missouri Synod said the Wisconsin Synod endorsed the false doctrine in these societies, and even had false doctrine among its pastors, (108). These attacks and untrue sweeping generalizations did us much harm. The Iowa Synod also spoke out against our monetary dependance on Europe.

Also because we were more closely dependant on Europe now, The Eupoean society began to attach a few strings to its money. These clear demands that we compromise in the area of fellowship were already mentioned on a previous page, (100-100). Eichelers and his successors said we can have the money, if we accept the societies newer mission policy. Now we can see how our dependance on Europe was now coming to a point of involving doctrinal problems. Would we compromise our Scriptural stand on church

fellowship? As early as 1864, we spoke of breaking ties with the Langenberger Verien , (99). But in the various letters that Koehler quotes from in his book we see that many times our Pastor took a wishy-washy stand toward the society. When the society asked us for a clear cut commitment on whether or not we would be less confessional or not, our men would respond by stating our position in as evangelical terms as possible. But the whole presentation in these correspondences never came to any logical conclusions, ie., we would defend our non-unionistic policies, give all kinds of excuses, but we would never say, thus, because this is our Scriptural stand, we must break all fraternal ties with you. We would "hem and haw", but never would we commit ourselves to saying, no, that is the end of our relationship! It always seemed as if we were hoping that we could keep receiving money for the building of the seminary and college, and we would leave it up to the Langenberger to take the first step in dissolving the relationship, (96); Bading employed some stalling techniques to avoid immediate confrontation, (98); (102-104; a letter of appeasement which borders on the ridiculous, (106); and Reim blamed the trouble on a misunderstanding. (106). This slowness to break relations was due to our past policies of handling fiscal matters, our loyalty to a group who gave birth to us. (75), and we felt obligated. (99) But though the toll of the mission societies pressures were visible on us, no compromise in actual practice of church fellowship was committed.

In my readings I found no compromise in doctrine. Of course this in itself does not make our Synod's actions excusable, but it is a point we need to recognize.

Now while some took a middle of the road position, others, we need to note, took a hard and fast position; ie., unlike others, they not only defended our non-unionistic practices, but also clearly told the society we must break with them. Koehler's repeated demonstrations made the point clear, (95,96); again in 1864 he spoke up, (99); Hoenecke was offended at the society's mocking of our confessionalism, and wrote a harsh letter; even Synod responded officially in a pointed letter to their attacks on us, (102-104). So we see that for a couple of years the Wisconsin Synod was undecided, not on the doctrine of church fellowship in itself, but if their ties with Europe called for an immediate split. But as time went on a split from the Langenberger was inevitable. I believe that this was true, even though we felt a ^{strong} sense of indebtedness to the society. Various factors which played a big part were 1. Our pastors in United States were more confessional than in 1850-1862; 2. Wallmann's influence on men the society sent over here, (47); 3. Pressures that the society now made on us to compromise; 4. The society's new approach and policy toward us; 5. spirit of ~~A~~ American independence; 6, the many ways our confessionalism ran counter to the society's objectives; 7. the strong voice of confessionalism by ~~conferences~~ in our synod, (95, 96, 99), and by conferences in our synod, (96,110). Koehler maintains 1. Our move to confessionalism in practice was

a natural one, and not caused by the Missouri Synod outbursts, (85);
 2. and gives his own excuses for our policy of unionism so-called,
 (80). Koehler maintains that the Wisconsin Synod was never
 unionistic, based on his historical observations, (99). ***

And in view of my readings, and what I have briefly tried to
 prove here, I believe that the Wisconsin Synod was not unionistic.
 Of course, I feel that this statement needs some qualification and
 explanation. We did have early ties with the Langenberger. But
 we were a confessionally Lutheran Church based on the confessional
 writings; we never forsook or changed any doctrine in the Word.
But, and this is a big but, when we saw a need for a seminary, a
 conflict of interest developed; the society had a new policy; and
 it directly opposed our policies. Of course, we had accepted or
 given money previously to this bigger project; Conrad sent money
 to support Union churches, (83); Muehlhaeuser accepted outside
 money for building acquisition;; (41-42). And so we see that there
 were instance of this before the seminary project was proposed.

But It was this seminary proposal which immediately made us realize
 that we were getting into trouble, for we wanted our own seminary,
 but we looked to Europe for money, and they looked to us for a
 more lenient policy on associations with other churches. Though
 some may disagree with me on this comparison I think it is valid.
 I believe that for our early Wisconsin Synod to accept support
 from the mission society was excusable and not outrightly wrong,
 (though it may have been ^{very} unwise), as long as no demands were made
 on us. Just as today if some churches accepted government money
 for a building project, etc., if they feel no strings will be attached

*** Check the two Addendum pages, 14-15, for an insertion here.

which will in effect have the government ruling the church, its practices, or doctrine. For example, the library building at Bethany College, Mankato, Minnesota. In this example we do not jump on the band wagon and accuse them of anti-Scriptural procedures, even though we may feel that it is an unwise policy, and could lead to undue pressures, or compromises in the church. But this comparison between the Wisconsin Synod of 1860-68 and Minnesota colleges can not be carried too far. For a person could possibly condemn the Wisconsin Synod of being "unequally yoked together with unbelievers." The attacks of the Iowa and Missouri Synod's on us for unionism prove that we gave offense, we gave the impression that we were one with the heretics and liberals in the Union, Reformed, and Lutheran body. For our excuse that we were joined only with the conservatives and Christians in the society is weak and is unreasonable. This giving of offense was wrong, and for a time it hurt the work of God's Kingdom in our midst. But I do not think we today nor the Missouri Synod can condemn them too harshly. For we did not compromise doctrine. If we did not compromise doctrine. If we keep this in mind, and the fact that as a young synod we needed time to mature, and to break all unethically former ties, then the Missouri Synod statements concerning the Wisconsin Synod's liberality in practice and doctrine will take on a new light. We were not as bad as the made us appear and we were not as good as some of our synod's historians make us out to be.

The biggest lesson we can gain from this study should have been clearly made long before this unionism, or any appearances

of unionism are costly, bring out attacks from conservative bodies, and are a definite hinderance to what should be an effective ministry by a Scripturally sound church body. It is definitely a more sound practice for a church body to operate on its own money, with its own men.

It was only a shame that no matter how much we yelled and shouted that we were a Lutheran, confessional, and a true synod, that we ourselves did not say, "no, that is it, no more will we have relations with your unionistic mission society!" We often spoke of breaking, (95-96), but we more or less left it up to them to make the definite break, probably because by means of this approach we could still receive money from them. In March 1868 the ^{Missouri} Missouri Society positively refused to send men to the Wisconsin Synod and again in April of that same year, (114). A year later the Prussian Supreme Church Council agreed to suspension of all activities with the Wisconsin Synod.

And with that suspension came a new day for the Wisconsin Synod, a suspension of attacks against the synod of being unionistic, un-Lutheran, and non-confessional. 1861-1868 were stormy years. As one reads the history of this period, he can not help but think as I did that thanks be to God's Grace and Help for bringing us safely to a point of confessionalism in both doctrine and practice.

ADDENDUM

We indeed were charged with unionism. There is some truth to these accusations, but we need to speak of these and look back upon them in a more evangelical than condemnatory fashion. Why we should look upon this in an evangelical way is that the historical background of our two synods (Wis. and Mis.) needs to be understood.

Missouri Synod had its origin in four surviving boatloads of German Lutherans who came to the shores of America. They came from basically one background, to settle in one area, Perry County, Missouri. So right from the start they had a good nucleus of members. And from this nucleus of like-minded pastors and laymen the synod became established and spread out to embrace others. Another big point is that they had a sizeable amount of money to work with. All this points out that from the start the Mis. Sy. was self-sustaining, as far as ties with other church bodies ^{were} ~~is~~ concerned.

The Wis. Sy. background is just the opposite. The mission societies had been sending men all over the world to keep God's Word alive. In the state of Wis. a few (three) men in the Mil. area decided to pool their spiritual efforts on common confessional grounds. And various men in Wisconsin aligned themselves with the young Wis. Sy. But here is where a problem arose. These original three men came from a unionistic background, and were sent over by the support of these mission societies. And so though they formed a confessional body, it still had natural ties with Europe. In fact, Wis. and other states were filled with other less confessional men who had charge of churches ^h which were unionistic in practice, ^{even} ~~if~~ ^{union} not in name. And if some of our conservative men were called to serve these congregations they were faced with

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coming to a unionistic congregation which may not have recognized the difference in having the term "Reformed" as part of their church name, and yet taught some Lutheran doctrines, and so felt it was expected they would be served by a Wis. Sy. man. This caused problems, especially when it appeared in ^{the} print of the Lutheraner. Also we needed more pastors, and Europe had them; and we had no seminary to train our own.

And to a small extent we received money from the mission societies. We were small, built on men sparsely spread out. We felt we could turn to others for financial help when our fiscal matters got too big to handle.

In a limited sense we were not self-sustaining, Not in the sense that we could not, ^{they} were not able to be, or that God wouldn't provide, but that in comparison to the Mis. Sy. our system didn't have the solid nucleus of ^a pastors and people, nor the monetary foundation on which we could solidly rely and depend. Understanding this ~~and~~ difference in background, we ascertain these thoughts: 1. the Mis. Sy. felt justified in condemning the Wis. Sy., 2. the Mis. Sy. should maybe have exercised more evangelical patience and understanding, 3. the Wis. Sy. was in a precarious situation, 4. the Wis. Sy. was not completely justified in its view that it was alright to maintain its mission society ties.