

THE TROUBLED BEGINNING
OF THE "ALLGEMEINE SYNODE" 1892-1895

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Whenever a student of history digs into the history of a particular area, he will usually unearth some event that is embarrassing, some event that the inhabitants of that particular area would just as soon leave buried. Such is the case with this era of Michigan history. The years of 1895-1910, are years that the Michigan Synod would just as soon forget. For during these years the Michigan Synod was split, the existence of the newly formed "Allgemeine Synode" was seriously endangered, and, what is even worse, mission work and worker training was weakened. One faction of the Michigan Synod was induced to an affiliation with the Augsburg Synod, a body that tolerated false doctrine. Even, the Michigan Seminary, the very point of controversy, was driven to ruin.

This series of events should never have happened. It was not caused by some doctrinal differences. Nor was it caused by some differences in practice. It was caused by a personality clash, a misunderstanding, and a failure to quietly discuss a difference of opinion.

Who was to blame for this conflict? Koehler and all other historians who follow his ideas, place all of the blame on the majority party of the Michigan Synod. They especially pick out Carl Boehner, Michigan Synod President 1894-1897, as the instigator of this sad state of affairs. Perhaps Koehler is right. But, perhaps Koehler is wrong! No one has ever challenged him on this point.

In this paper, I shall introduce no new evidence. Nor have I uncovered any new historical facts. What I shall do is to look at the existing historical facts from a different angle. In this way I shall challenge Koehler's view.

When Koehler discusses this matter in the Michigan Synod, he places all the blame on Carl Bohner. Koehler describes Bohner as, "An unstable character which the Wisconsin Synod and even earlier the Basel mission house had found out; in addition the man was unscrupulous."¹ Bohner graduated from the Basel mission house in 1859. He was examined by Muehlhaeuser and was placed in the congregation at Fond du Lac. Around 1863 he was in charge of a congregation in Beaver Dam. Here, Bohner wrote two pamphlets, both of which created storms of protests. He wrote one pamphlet on Methodism. Koehler describes this pamphlet as one, "in which he had attacked this persuasion and its practice in an unreasonable and unbridled way."² The second pamphlet was directed against American women, especially with regard to the practice of abortion. Koehler again comments on this pamphlet: "That was scandalous, the more so because Bohner was altogether too confused a mind to handle the subject with the necessary care."³ Because of the heated controversy these two pamphlets stirred up, Bohner left the Wisconsin Synod. Koehler claims that he joined the Episcopalians with the intention of going as missionary to China. He came to Michigan and received the charge of the mission

1. J.P. Koehler, The History of the Wisconsin Synod, (St. Cloud, Minn: Sentinel Publishing Co., 1970), p. 192.

2. Ibid., p. 94.

3. Ibid., p. 95.

congregation at Reed City, Michigan in 1874.

Koehler believed that Boehner was still the "scoundrel" he was in 1863. So when troubles arose in Michigan, and Koehler saw Boehner as the president, he put together all the facts and came up with the conclusion that Boehner was up to his old tricks, making trouble.

Koehler's view is often the one that is blindly echoed by other modern historians. But this is a shame. For Koehler's view is based on his own personal interpretation of the facts. Possibly, Koehler's view is based on subjective sources. The "Gemeinde Blatt" gave the facts the way they were seen from a Wisconsin view. The "Synodal-Freund" gave the facts as seen by the Michigan Synod. Koehler rejected the Michigan articles because they were too slanted, too subjective. He got much of his information from the "Gemeinde Blatt." It is just as possible that the "Gemeinde Blatt" could have been slanted the opposite way of the Michigan publication. To get to the truth, one must search through both sides and try to find the true facts.

Another reason that blind following of Koehler's view is a crime is because Koehler's view is based on certain presuppositions. Koehler assumes that the Michigan vote to join the "Allgemeine Synode" in 1892 was unanimous, and that only after that vote, did a few men become unsatisfied with the set-up. Another assumption that Koehler has to make is that all those who voted for the union wanted to get rid of the theological part of their Seminary, and that they wanted to get rid of it immediately. One more assumption is that Boehner and his companions were unscrupulous, unchristian men.

But, can we necessarily make those assumptions? Can we definitely say that the majority wanted to close down the theological department of the Seminary? Those that did vote for the closing down of this seminary, did they want to effect it immediately? And also, just because Boehner struck out too harshly against two problems after only four years in the ministry, does that mean he was a scoundrel? Could that problem of overzealousness not be attributed to his inexperience?

An objective historian will want to look at the facts as they exist and will want to decide for himself how he will interpret them. He will not rely on another's interpretation of the facts.

To determine why the events happened as they did in 1895, we must go back to the beginning and quickly trace the historical development of the Michigan Synod.

The actual beginning of the Michigan Synod took place on December 10, 1860. On that day, eight pastors and three laymen formally organized the Synod. The main objective of this organization was mission work. The pastors wanted to unite so that they could do more extensive work in spreading the gospel.

Those early fathers of the Michigan Synod were very energetic. They started missions all over Michigan. But their energetic mission endeavors greatly surpassed their man power. Pastor Eberhardt traveled all over Michigan opening up new missions, and setting up preaching stations. But there were no men to put into these new pulpits. The synod could never match the growing need of pastors. The result was that many of these congregations started by Eberhardt left the Michigan Synod and joined some other

church body, just because thereby they could get a pastor. This proved extremely frustrating for the young Michigan Synod.

The Michigan Synod resolved to remedy their situation by establishing their own pastor-training school. In 1885 they established their Seminary at Manchester, Michigan with eight students. By August, 1887, they were ready to dedicate their Seminary building in Saginaw. In July 1888, the first two Seminary graduates were assigned as laborers in the Lord's vineyard. From then on things looked even better. Each year men were assigned to congregations. The situation was coming under control. Vacancies were being filled. New missions were opened. The Synod was growing; inwardly and outwardly.

Then in 1891 came an invitation to join the Minnesota and Wisconsin Synods to form a federated body. In August of that year Pastors Lederer, Mayer, P. Kionka, and Director Huber of the Seminary went to Watertown to meet with Professor Ernst of the Wisconsin Synod, and Pastor Albrecht, president of the Minnesota Synod. They decided that a federation was possible, and drew up eight points of discussion for the union.

These eight points were brought up before the Michigan Synod at its convention of 1892. They were all discussed, especially point 7, which dealt with the educational institutions of the federated synod. These eight points were agreed upon "as they were understood." So in October of that same year, a constitution was drawn up and the "Allgemeine Synode" was born.

The question always arises, "Why did Michigan agree to this federation, and to abolishing the theological department of their

Seminary if they weren't going to keep their promise?"

Michigan's man power problems were solved. They were now enjoying a period of spiritual prosperity and inner peace. So why join a federation? Michigan joined this federation to increase its potent mission outreach. By joining with Wisconsin and Minnesota they could do even more work for the Lord. Krauss explains it this way: "The determining factors for the Michigan Synod were the acquisition of a promising mission field in the West, which was needed, if the Saginaw Seminary continued to produce pastors, the inward and outward growth to be expected, the better training of pastors and teachers, the more energetic support of charitable causes."⁴

Added to these external advantages is also the fact that all three of these synods were agreed in doctrinal matters, as well as in practice. They could base this union "fully and wholly on the Canonical Writings of the Old and New Testaments as to God's revealed Word, and on the Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church contained in the Book of Concord of 1580."⁵ A union of this sort could do much for the spiritual growth of all three synods. By joint Bible study and joint discussions on practical application of Biblical principles, each of the pastors of these synods could grow in his own spiritual life and in his ability to minister to his congregation. Yes, a federation was spiritually advantageous.

4. K.F. Krauss, "The Michigan District," Michigan District History, 1833-1970 (Ann Arbor: LithoCrafters Inc., 1973), p. 6.

5. My own translation of "Die Vereinigung," Evangelisch Lutherischer Synodal-Freund (Vol. 5, Nov, 1892), p. 128.

It should be noted here that the Michigan Synod looked upon this union as a loosely federated group, and not as a merged body. Michigan understood that each synod would keep its own identity, and would govern its own internal problems. The only authority the federated synod had was over doctrine and practice, and over the federated educational institutions. F. Huber writes in the "Synodal-Freund" that this was the understanding. "The Federated Synod joins itself together not indeed in the internal governing of the individual synods. Its sole authority is, it 'assumes the supervision over teaching and practice within its districts, especially also the supervision over all the educational institutions existing in its districts, and it exercises these through its officers.'"⁶ Michigan was looking forward to running its affairs just as it had in the past, with no outside interference. This becomes an important factor as the history of the "Allgemeine Synode" progresses.

But, the question still exists, "Why did Michigan agree to give up the Seminary?" Perhaps a more appropriate question would be, "Did Michigan want to give up their Seminary?" Krauss said that the main reason for the federation as far as Michigan was concerned was a western mission field "which was needed if the Saginaw Seminary continued to produce pastors."⁷ Does this sound like the Michigan men were really interested in dropping their Seminary. If they discontinued it, what need did they have of a western mission field, or even of a federation?

6. F. Huber, "Unser Seminar," Evangelisch Lutherischer Synodal-Freund, (Vol. 8, Aug., 1895), p. 95.

7. See footnote 4.

In the Michigan Synod Convention of 1892, most of the discussion over these eight articles was centered around giving up the theological department of the Seminary. One of the last statements in this discussion leads me to believe that some of these men had the hope that the one seminary of the "Allgemeine Synode" would be located in Saginaw. "As pointed out it has been considered that two departments exist in the Seminary in which care will be given for the need of the entering students. If at a later time it becomes necessary to separate these departments, that it not be excluded to transfer one of these departments to Saginaw."⁸ Did these men get some hope that the Seminary in Saginaw might become the Federated Synodical Seminary? And if so, where did they get this hope? It appears from this quote that in 1892 the Michigan Synod was not in favor of discontinuing the theological department of their Seminary for good. The majority had too much love for their institution. They also may have had plans for a Seminary for the "Allgemeine Synode" in Saginaw.

Yet, the fact remains that the Synod did promise to discontinue their Seminary. Again if we look at the proceedings from the Synod Convention of 1892 we can see the reason why. These men looked upon this act as a sacrifice that they should make. "This is a sacrifice that one should make for the good of the whole, as hard as it will be for many."⁹ They were willing to sacrifice their most cherished possession for the good of the federation. But it might have been that many were still hoping that the

8. Proceedings of the Michigan Synodical Convention, 1892, p. 37.

9. Ibid.

"Allgemeine Synode" would accept the thought behind the sacrifice without really accepting the sacrifice itself. But this is merely speculation. I have no facts to back up my statement. I am only reading between the lines.

When the Michigan Synod approved these eight articles, they were approving an ideal arrangement. They realized that in order to prepare the best qualified pastors, only one Seminary was needed. "We must give our future pasotrs the best possible instruction. This takes place when they are instructed in one institution exclusively standing for this end. If the d@vidid energy at the three Seminaries are unified, then the achievement of this aim will not be difficult."¹⁰ This was the ideal they agreed to strive for, one theological seminary. But, as is often the case, the ideal takes time to implement. Practical problems often arise that make it impossible to immediately accomplish the intended goal. Such was the case in the Michigan Synod.

After the Michigan Synod agreed to the eight points, and the "Allgemeine Synode" accepted its sacrifice, Michigan became aware of some practical problems that would arise. Whereas the Seminary in Saginaw usually had around ten students each year, the number that decided to go to Milwaukee was considerably less. One of the reasons for this decrease of students was the distance between Michigan and Wisconsin; both in miles and in attitude.

The lake that separated Michigan and Wisconsin made the trip a long one. But the lake not only increased the distance of miles, it also increased the psychological distance. Minnesota and

10. Ibid.

Wisconsin had always been close, sharing many things throughout the years. But Michigan and Wisconsin never did share that closeness. Thus, the students from Michigan would feel like outsiders in Milwaukee. Add to this, the fact that many parents in Michigan were hesitant to send their sons the added distance to Milwaukee. The lack of students from Michigan preparing for the ministry became a real problem.

After these problems arose, the Michigan Synod began to have second thoughts. Perhaps they had been too hasty in jumping into the federation. Perhaps they had made a mistake when they gave up their theological Seminary. They began to ask themselves what they had gotten themselves into. They began to worry about a man power shortage. With the closing of their Seminary they would have to rely solely on the "Allgemeine Synode" for their pastors. And if they could not get their young men to study for the ministry, how long would the "Allgemeine Synode" carry them? They may have even begun to feel regrets. Wisconsin had not given up any thing. Minnesota had given up its theological seminary, but had received in return the teachers' theological training school. Michigan had given up its seminary and had not received anything in return. Michigan began to worry about its future.

This was the reason that the Michigan Synod resolved in 1893 "Resolved, that we prepare for the Federated Synod the humble request to permit us to establish the former arrangement in our Seminary for an unspecified time, because of the existing situation in our midst."¹¹ It is to be noted that this request took place

11. Kurzgefaszte Geschichte der Evangelisch Lutherischer Synode von Michigan u. a. St. (Saginaw: F.C. Reutter Co., 1910), pp 46-47.

while Lederer was president of the Synod, and that Boehner did not introduce this "new idea." The "Allgemeine Synode" reluctantly agreed to this arrangement. "It may be extremely difficult to obtain the desirable theological instruction in your institution at Saginaw in the way sought after by the Michigan Synod. Yet, we must for the meanwhile, hand over the control of this affair to the Michigan Synod because of the situation as it exists there."¹²

Although the Michigan Synod did receive permission to continue their theological Seminary for a while, they still had in mind the desire to have only one seminary. As soon as the Michigan people learned to trust and feel at home with the Wisconsin and Minnesota Synods, they would, on their own, give up their Seminary. They would willingly send their children to Milwaukee. But this would take time. And this object would have been accomplished if the point would not have been pushed.

But the matter was pushed! It was stirred up, and inflamed to such an extent that it came to a boiling point in June 1895. Huber places the blame for this unfortunate affair on Wisconsin.

In the "Synodal-Freund" of December, 1895, Huber wrote an article concerning the history of the federation of the three synods. He writes, "Director Hoyer came and worked at the minds of a few who voiced opposition to the continuation of the theological department, and the result was that after a year and a half of quiet but energetic work the Michigan Synod was divided into two

12. Ibid., p. 47.

opposing camps, one group for the continuation of the Seminary, the other group against it."¹³ But it did not end there. "The smouldering fire of the conflict broke into bright flames for the first time at the Pastoral Conference at Hopkins, where a Wisconsin Pastor wished to have a vote concerning the Seminary, because he wanted to make his connection with the Michigan Synod depend on that."¹⁴ From that time onward, the left in the Michigan Synod became larger and larger. The minority wanted to close down the theological department of the Seminary immediately. The majority also wanted to close down the Seminary, but they wanted time to take care of the practical problems facing them. Both sides wanted the same end, they were disagreed only on how long it should take to achieve this goal.

The minority seemed to be making no progress toward convincing the majority of immediate action. This is when they appealed to Wisconsin for help. And the Wisconsin Synod stepped in! Professor Ernst came to a free conference at Saginaw. Actually, he had no right to interfere with the internal problems of the Michigan Synod. According to the agreement made in 1892, the "Allgemeine Synode" had authority only over the business of the federated synod, and over the synodical institutions. This division was not over a synodical institution, it was over a practical question of time. It was an internal problem, a problem that should have been decided on by the Michigan Synod, a problem that was not a federated synod one.

13. F. Huber, "Die Allgemeine Synode und der Streit in Michigan," Evangelisch Lutherischer Synodal-Freund (Vol. 8, Dec. 1895), p. 139.

14. Ibid.

This was the emotional climate in which Carl Boehner was elected as synodical president in 1894. He was not the first president that requested an extension of the theological Seminary in Saginaw. But it was during his presidency that the issue came to a head. Therefore he is the scapegoat upon whom all these troubles were blamed.

It was at the Michican Synodical Conference in June 1895 that the spark was touched to the tinder. Here it was that the minority made the final break.

In Boehner's presidential report he proposed to request from the "Allgemeine Synode" a continuation of the theological department of their Seminary until all the students who were then in the constitution should complete their education. All new students entering the Seminary for theological training would be sent to Milwaukee,

This is when the minority stood up and protested. They wanted to extend the Seminary only for three years, only until those students in the Seminary had completed their course of study. They even became vehement in their opposition. If this request went to the "Allgemeine Synode" they proposed "That we reject all responsibility for such a resolution, that we refuse all further support and interest for the maintenance of the Seminary from this day on; that we wish to submit this concern to the "Allgemeine Synode" for judgment."¹⁵ These seem like harsh measures, especially when they were only talking about a difference of a three or four year extension. And yet this was the way that Lederer

15. The Proceedings of the Synodical Convention of the Michigan Synod, 1895, p. 25.

and his group reacted.

Not only did the minority walk out of the convention and cut off all support for the Seminary, but they also wrote to the "Allgemeine Synode" for assistance. It is strange why Lederer would appeal to the "Allgemeine Synode" in the case of an internal question. We have no record of what Lederer wrote to the "Allgemeine Synode" but it must have been some letter! For at the Convention of the Federated Synod at St. Paul, Minnesota, the "Allgemeine Synode" decided to disregard Boehner, his men, and their request. Instead, they decided to go with the minority.

When Boehner presented this request to the committee a long discussion broke out concerning it. The committee decided to reject Boehner's request for two reasons: "1) This proposed request does not come from the entire Synod of Michigan, 2) that a lack of trust exists in the administration of the Synod as well as in the administration of the Seminary."¹⁶ The "Allgemeine Synode" did not even discuss the proposed topic. They rather rejected the request on the spot just because there was a rift in the Michigan Synod, and just because the minority did not get their way. The Federated Synod should have referred this matter back to the Michigan Synodical Conference, and should have let them argue out the matter on their own. But they didn't. They sided with Michigan's minority.

Then things went from bad to worse. The Michigan Synod answered the attack against them by suspending the minority pastors from the Synod. The minority looked to the "Allgemeine Synode" for

16. The Third Convention of the 'Allgemeine Synode,' 1895, p. 5.

aid, and joined that body as a district. The Michigan Synod joined the Augsburg Synod.

The Seminary began to decay, and finally dwindled down to nothing. Two reasons attribute to the destruction of the very thing that caused the fight. The first reason is the loss of the support of the minority congregations. The decrease of these contributions could play an important part in the Seminary's destruction. But the second reason is perhaps more accountable to the decay than the first. The split in the synod came not because of a doctrinal disagreement, but merely because of a misunderstanding.

It always seems that when a division comes about because of a doctrinal difference, those that break away for conscience sake usually prosper, even though they are the minority. But this was not the case in this instance. The break was made because of angry pride. Neither side would give in. Therefore anger and doubt were the attitudes of both sides. And the majority found out that they could not run a seminary on these types of attitudes. . . . These attitudes of anger and doubt were actually the attitudes that ran the seminary into the gound.

Thus ends the historical facts of this era. These events should not have happened. They could have been avoided. They could have been prevented. But blind prejudice, and bull-headed pride on both sides created this embarrassing and possibly harmful separation.

Now I would like to make a few thoughts about these facts. I would like to ask some questions that were raised in my mind as

I studied these facts. Perhaps these thoughts and questions can shed a new light on an old subject.

First of all, why would the Michigan Synod have any desire to discontinue the theological department of their Seminary? Could there have been some underhanded dealings in the early meetings? Was there some hope given to the Michigan people in regard to getting the theological Seminary of the "Allgemeine Synode" at Saginaw? There was a request for a continuation of the Seminary in Michigan even while Lederer was president in 1893. Now, why did he become so vehement in 1895 when Boehner made a similar request? It is important to answer these questions before one can get to the pure historical truth.

Another question that must be considered is this: Did the "Allgemeine Synode" have the authority to step in and deal with this problem as they did? The constitution gave them authority over synodical institutions. But the issue in Michigan was not over whether or not they should terminate Saginaw as a theological Seminary. Both sides were agreed on that issue. The problem was when to do it. This should have been left up to the Michigan Synod. It was their problem.

The actual controversy came down to this question, "When does a weak brother cease to be weak and begin to be demanding?" The Michigan Synod's problem was one of weakness. They could not bring themselves or their people to put their complete trust in the "Allgemeine Synode." The "Allgemeine Synode" had to decide how long they would put up with their brother's weakness. They obviously decided to make the cut off date August, 1895. But were they perhaps a little too hasty? If they would have been patient

with Michigan's weakness for just a little while longer, perhaps this chapter in the Wisconsin Synod's history would not have been written.

This brings me to my final question. Why was the "Allgemeine Synode" so hasty? The constitution for the Federated Synod was drawn up in October, 1892. By August, 1895 the "Allgemeine Synode" forced a showdown with the Michigan Synod. That is a period of less than three years. That seems like a rather short time in which the Michigan Synod was to introduce and implement the idea of discontinuing its Seminary. Usually when a synod wishes to introduce a completely new idea to its people, it will require longer than three years to do it. Yet, Michigan received only 34 months to do so. Why!?

Here permit me to let my imagination go for a while. In 1892 when the three synods decided to federate, they decided to have one Seminary. Now, Minnesota had a Seminary, but they gave it up and received in return the teacher training institution. Michigan also had a prospering Seminary. But they also gave it up, but received no consolation. Wisconsin on the other hand had a large university and an established Seminary, but no definite home for it. It had been moved from place to place since it was established. Yet, it was decided to build a Seminary in Milwaukee. Thus, Wisconsin gave up nothing to join the federation and in fact received a stationary Seminary.

Now what would have happened if Minnesota and Michigan had joined voting power and tried to get the "Allgemeine" Seminary placed at Saginaw where the buildings already existed. By joining together, they would have had the majority. That proposed

set up would have made things more even, each synod would have had a major educational institution.

Perhaps this is why Wisconsin kept pushing for the close of the Saginaw Theological Seminary. Perhaps they were worried about the Seminary moving from Wisconsin to Michigan. I know that this is purely speculation. There are no real facts to back this up. Yet, this proposed theory would answer a lot of otherwise unsolved questions. It would answer the question of why Michigan was willing to "give up" their Seminary. It would answer the question of why Wisconsin pushed so hard for the Michigan Seminary's close. It would also explain why there was so brief a span of time between the federation's organization and the open attack on Boehner. It is something to think about.

These troubled years of the "Allgemeine Synode" are over. The three synods once more federated, and later on merged in 1917. Now, the Wisconsin Synod is one of the few fighters for Confessionalism, and for pure Bible teaching. I believe that our Synod has learned one thing from these troubled years, and that is patience with weak brothers." This can be seen from our Synod's dealing with the Missouri Synod in the late 50's. Perhaps this is a lesson that every pastor of our Synod should learn. As long as doctrine or practice is not the main issue, we can afford to be patient with a weak brother, and we can also afford to discuss these matters in a civil and friendly way. This should be our attitude in hopes that we can strengthen our weak brother. If, by studying our forefathers' mistakes, we can keep from making the same mistakes over again, then perhaps this study of history is worthwhile.

Was Carl Boehner as bad as Koehler made him out to be? The real truth may never be learned. But in keeping with every man's right to a fair trial, I thought it necessary to write this paper. At least maybe our people can be made aware of one other way of looking at the facts. This way, they can make up their own minds concerning these early years of the "Allgemeine Synode."

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