

To Whom Shall We Go?

An interview with Eugene P. Kauffeld regarding the split of St. John's Watertown with the Missouri Synod

In the short history of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, one could say that its defining moment was its split from the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod in 1961. The same may be said of St. John's Lutheran Church in Watertown, WI. On August 30th, 1971, St. John's voted to end its membership in the Missouri Synod. Ten years separate the break of the Wisconsin Synod from the Missouri Synod and the break of St. John's from the Missouri Synod. Another four years separate the break of St. John's from the Missouri Synod and when St. John's formally joined the Wisconsin Synod. In view of that span of fourteen years, one may wonder why St. John's did not join the Wisconsin Synod earlier, considering that it was surrounded by three other Wisconsin Synod Churches in Watertown. As a matter of fact, one Wisconsin Synod congregation sits directly across the street from St. John's.

As a son of St. John's, Watertown, and the grandson of its pastor at the time of the split with the Missouri Synod, this author has often wondered about the reason St. John's did not split with the Missouri Synod and join the Wisconsin Synod earlier. To answer that question, this author sat down with Pastor Eugene P. Kauffeld for a fifty minute interview regarding the beginning of his ministry and his first ten years at St. John's. In eventually answering this main question, Pastor Kauffeld also gave unique insight into the internal strife in the Missouri Synod from his seminary years and through his initial years of ministry at St. John's. The following is a small sampling of the insights Pastor Kauffeld offered in an interview with Seminary senior Jordan Ertl. The interview was conducted on December 4th, 2010.

The interview begins with Pastor Kauffeld's time at the seminary. The doctrine of the Word was already under attack at the Seminary level during his time at Concordia, St. Louis. He told of classes where arguments would erupt between students and professors regarding the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture. As a matter of fact, he told of a gathering of the whole student body with the faculty, so that the arguments could be resolved and so that peace could be restored to the classroom.

After his Seminary years, Pastor Kauffeld was called to Holdrege, Nebraska and then to Mankato, Minnesota. During those initial years of his ministry, he described those doctrinal problems as "maturing." Throughout the interview, he talked about fighting against the higher critical approach to Scripture and its perversion of the doctrine of the Word in whatever capacity he could. In 1966, he was called to St. John's in Watertown.

The Wisconsin Synod and the Norwegian Synod had broken their fellowship with the Missouri Synod by the time he arrived at St. John's. However, Pastor Kauffeld submitted that the Missouri Synod stance on fellowship was the symptom and not the core malady. The reason Missouri held the fellowship position it did was because its view of Scripture had deteriorated. This was the issue he and his congregation sought to attack and correct, and then the other issues of fellowship would follow suit.

When Pastor Kauffeld got to St. John's he explained and "clarified" the problems of the Missouri Synod to the members of the congregation. He also took an active role in addressing the doctrinal issues on a synod-wide basis. In that capacity, he had the opportunity to meet with leaders of the "liberal" side of the doctrinal debate. He described the views of the "liberal" theologians as very deceiving. He said they would agree that the Bible was inspired, inerrant and

infallible, but one had to dig deeper. Finally he asked them, "Do you view the events of the Bible as historically accurate?" They said no. That was where the key distinction lay. They viewed the Bible as inerrant, infallible and inspired as to its message, but not so as to its content.

Pastor Kauffeld also discussed the president of the Missouri Synod at that time, J.A.O. Preus II. He knew President Preus personally and had the opportunity to discuss the doctrinal problems with him several times. He described him as a sound theologian, but also thought that his dream was to unite all Lutherans. Therefore he was willing to give on some doctrinal issues in order to achieve that goal. He said that President Preus would, "Speak against them privately" but in the end, when it came to the public decision of whether or not to join in fellowship with the ALC, he paraphrased Preus as saying, "If you vote for the fellowship, I'll live with it."

Another interesting development which Pastor Kauffeld described was a meeting in Chicago in which there was potential to bring the controversy to a head and hopefully to resolve it. He said they (presumably confessional pastors and leaders) had contacted the "liberal element" and were going to discuss holding a vote in which congregations of the synod would choose which school, liberal or confessional, which they wanted to follow. The synod would then be split accordingly. The liberals could go with those who chose them, and the Missouri synod would take great strides toward becoming confessional again. But that meeting did not go as planned due to circumstances which Pastor Kauffeld describes further in the interview.

In a final effort to bring attention to how destructive having a low view of Scripture was, Pastor Kauffeld along with other "conservative" pastors met in North Hollywood, California prior to the 1971 LCMS convention to discuss forming an alternative church body which would later become the Federation of Authentic Lutherans (FAL). He said that FAL's original purpose

was not to be a haven for churches which wished to leave the LCMS, rather their intention in forming it was a final effort to call attention to how the synod had strayed from doctrinal purity. After the 1971 convention, FAL was established as a formal church body. Its leaders then intended to make it an alternative to the LCMS and develop it into another fully functional synod. However, some complications arose. Some of the leaders of the Missouri Synod expressed a willingness to leave and to help to lead FAL, but did not follow through. On top of that, there was a doctrinal dispute about fellowship in the Lord's Supper and, as a result, factions developed. After Pastor Kauffeld was elected president, St. John's submitted a resolution to the convention of FAL to dissolve because it had become unsustainable due to its small membership and divisions.

Thus far, most of the points addressed in this introductory paper to the interview have been less about St. John's congregation and more about the synod wide events. However, therein lies the answer to the main question. St. John's did not split with Missouri earlier because it and its pastors wanted to make sure that they had attempted to use every possible means to return the Missouri Synod to sound doctrine. That had not happened until the 1971 synod convention. St. John's had submitted resolutions, written letters of concern to district and synod officials, withheld its synodical offerings and outwardly refused to honor fellowship with the ALC. The formation of FAL was the final attempt to get the attention of the rest of the synod so that they would "wake up" and reject the negative critical approach to Scripture. FAL, for the reasons described above, wasn't sustainable. So, after the dissolution of FAL, and having exhausted all possible avenues of correcting the Missouri Synod, the voters of St. John's voted on June 9th, 1975 to apply for membership in the Wisconsin Synod.

So, to briefly answer the main question, St. John's sought to bring the Missouri Synod back to doctrinal purity from 1966-1971. When it became clear that this goal was unachievable, St. John's left the Missouri Synod for FAL. When FAL dissolved, St. John's "naturally" moved to the Wisconsin Synod.

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."