

The Wisconsin Synod Retained an Evangelical
Attitude and a Degree of Open-Mindedness
during the Missouri Synod's Union Endeavors
with the American Lutheran Church in the
Years 1938-1947.

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The Wisconsin Synod and its members have generally been regarded as hard-headed conservatives, stubborn Germans, and, often, as people who simply turn a deaf ear to progress, renovation and change. These charges are prevalent today and were also aired in the late thirties and early forties when the Wisconsin Synod took its stand against the proposed union of the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church. It is not the purpose of this paper to totally disprove such accusations; for the Wisconsin Synod did take a firm and hard stand. However, one must realize that this was necessary because of the Scriptural doctrines involved. This paper will instead show that these charges do not apply in their fullest sense. That the terms mentioned above are to a great extent what might be called over-exaggerations will become quite clear in view of several examples of our Synod's open-minded, evangelical attitude during this period of controversy.

The seeds of controversy were sown as early as 1925 when the Missouri Synod, coveting the fellowship of the Ohio, Iowa and Buffalo synods, met with representatives of these bodies as well as with representatives of the Wisconsin Synod, to draw up a set of articles of union called the Chicago Theses. The intended result was never realized when, as a result of this document, the Ohio, Iowa and Buffalo Synods merged by themselves to form the American Lutheran Church. Two years later in 1932, the Missouri Synod published its "Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod". It was hoped that this when presented to the American Lutheran Church would in some way bring about doctrinal agreement and union. Representatives of the American Lutheran

Church held six meetings with their Missouri counterparts which effected both the former body's acceptance of the "Brief Statement" and the composition of the doctrinal paper, "Declaration of the American Lutheran Church Representatives". The shot heard 'round the theological world came in June of 1938 when, at the Thirty-Seventh Regular Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, the Missouri Synod accepted the "Brief Statement" and the "Declaration" as "the doctrinal basis for future church-fellowship". Fellowship was not immediately realized because of disagreement in what Missouri called "four non-fundamental doctrines". Differences were apparent in regard to the doctrinal stands on the Anti-Christ, the total conversion of Jews, the physical resurrection of martyrs and the interpretation of the 1000 years in Revelation 20.

The Wisconsin Synod of course, was immediately involved because it was in fellowship with Missouri and also because the Missouri Synod made the following statement in convention: "It is understood that, as far as the Missouri Synod is concerned, this whole matter....must be submitted for approval to the other synod's constituting the Synodical Conference". A reply was immediately forthcoming when Professor Lehninger wrote in the official Wisconsin Synod publication, "The Quartalschrift", that "in this case, church-fellowship should not be established until a full agreement in and clear understanding of all points at issue has been reached, be they fundamental or non-fundamental, so long as they are Scriptural-there is no room for other doctrines and opinions in the church". This quotation is characteristic of the strong

and firm stand which Wisconsin held throughout the years of debate. This Scriptural stand is not a pigheaded or stubborn stand, but rather it is a God-fearing stand. But though, as we have said, this opinion by Lehninger is characteristic of Wisconsin between 1938-1947, there is still to be seen evidence of an evangelical, open-minded attitude.

A standing committee was appointed by President Brenner to evaluate the two documents which had been proposed as a basis for union between Missouri and the American Lutheran Church. This committee met in 1938 and its "Summary" was clear and concise. By no means did they vindicate the step taken by their sister synod, but neither did they immediately condemn her actions. The "Summary" took the form of questions which were designed to illicit a response from the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church. It was an evangelical and open-minded overture toward these two bodies to find out if old doctrinal controversies had really been settled.

Another example of what might be termed open-mindedness is apparent in an article in the 1940 volume of the Quartalschrift. Written by Edmund Reim, the article is entitled "The Strength of Christian Unity". Reim's pen set forth the principle that, in all union endeavors, the necessary precautions must be taken to insure that the doctrines of the Bible are neither violated nor compromised. Yet the prevailing idea in this article is a "let's not be legalistic or bullheaded - but let's look and see" attitude. This is made obvious by such statements as "we have not yet passed judgement, are not charging that there is an error, but have pointed to places where it is desirable to have complete assurance that the old fault

no longer lingers....we are waiting, open to conviction". Indeed, a very evangelical and open-minded statement for a "pig-headed" Wisconsin Synod man..

Prior to this, but following both the standing committee's "Summary" and the American Lutheran Church Convention in Sandusky Ohio, the Synod set forth its position in what was named the "Watertown Resolutions". This document served notice that there existed no doctrinal basis for fellowship between the church bodies in question. Consequently, it also recommended suspension of negotiations between the bodies. While the "Watertown Resolutions" reflected a hard-nosed Scriptural stand; nevertheless, they also, by asking for suspension of negotiations rather than a termination, reflected an open-mindedness sprinkled with common sense. The inherent idea was to have the American Lutheran Church work at its doctrinal aberrations by itself and then, if successful, resume meeting with representatives of the Missouri Synod. The "Watertown Resolutions" did not rule out the possibility of future union, but merely asked that it be postponed until doctrinally feasible.

However, the Missouri Synod continued its courtship. The "Statement by the Missouri Synod Committee for Lutheran Union" is noteworthy here. In reply to the latest doctrinal communique from the American Lutheran Church they stated that the latter had satisfactorily answered inquiries regarding their position on objective justification and open questions. At the same time, they postponed fellowship on the basis of other doctrinal misunderstandings and also because of the objections of the other synods in the Synodical Conference. Despite the Wisconsin Synod's evan-

gical attitude, it is obvious that they had duly impressed their Scriptural objections on the Missouri Synod. Openminded? Yes! Wishy-washy? No!

The American Lutheran Church made its own move to draw the Wisconsin Synod closer. An invitation was sent out asking delegates from Wisconsin to attend their conference and discuss foreign mission work and Lutheran cooperation in general. President Brenner replied in behalf of the Wisconsin Synod and wrote in his June 10, 1941 letter: "It is our conviction that the only right approach between our Lutheran bodies is by way of doctrinal discussion and that practical cooperation must be the expression of true spiritual unity". While stating his position clearly and in a very concise manner, President Brenner produced a letter with an evangelical and polite tone. This knack of his was also brought out at the Thirty-Ninth Regular Convention of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States which was held in Saginaw, Michigan in 1944.

Here Brenner presented Wisconsin's "Questions on the Status of Lutheran Union". It was a paper which pointed out to Missouri the difficulties which stood in the way of fellowship with the American Lutheran Church. Yet it did not condemn but merely asked questions for the purpose of having these difficulties either acknowledged or else removed. Missouri was not called to take the stand then and there; but was evangelically asked to explain the status of its union endeavors. Brenner closed the presentation with the polite, evangelical, and pleading words: "May we express the hope that your consideration of....these frank questions may help to dispel the confusion that is besetting the church and

strengthen the ties of common faith that unites us". This was the tone of an evangelical brother not that of a damning judge.

Certainly, it can be shown that our Synod was obstinate in one respect during these deliberations; however a stubborn stand on the principles of Scripture is nothing to be ashamed of. The Wisconsin Synod should be credited with "keeping its cool" during this period of time. Their steadfast confession was certainly instrumental in Missouri's 1947 convention decision to rescind its 1938 resolution and break off discussions with the American Lutheran Church. At the same time, the Wisconsin Synod's evangelical, open-minded attitude was a big factor in keeping a semblance of peace within the Synodical Conference and in earning for itself the respect and good-will of many.