

The Roles of the N.W.C. Faculty and
the N.W.C. Board of Control in the
"Watertown Case" as one of the Origins
of the Protestant Controversy

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I must admit that I have always had a sort of fascination for the "Protestant Controversy." I think I am intrigued by this controversy that arose in our Synod because it seems to be a very well kept secret in our Synod. As far as I can recall, I never once heard of the Protestant Controversy until I was at the Seminary here in Mequon. I remember that when this controversy was first mentioned by the professors, which one I forget, I immediately went to the bookstore at the morning break and purchased my volume of J. Ph. Koehler's "History of the Wisconsin Synod." I soon found, to my dismay, that Koehler does not speak of the Protestant Controversy. Only in the introduction is this controversy mentioned and there in almost an outline fashion. However, my zeal for knowledge concerning the controversy soon wanted. I guess I came to the conclusion that whatever the point of controversy was, no matter how the controversy came about, those who left our Wisconsin Synod must have been in the wrong and we must have been right in this matter. The very recent dealings with the Missouri Synod during my synodical higher education seemed to cement the feeling that in this doctrinal controversy too, the Wisconsin Synod must have acted correctly according to God's Word. I then gave the Protestant Controversy no further thought.

Then came Senior Church History with the assignments of term papers during the second quarter. Once again my interest in the Protestant Controversy was kindled. Once again, I began to look in the Protestant Controversy, this time to find out what really happened and who was really right, without blindly

accepting that the Wisconsin Synod just had to be right. As I began to look into the Protestant Controversy I was at first more interested in the end results. The more I look for end results, the more I realized that I didn't know very much about how the Protestant Controversy came about. Oh, I knew the names involved, the Watertown Case, the Ft. Atkinson Case, the Beitz Paper, the Gutachten, the Western Wisconsin District, etc., all, and yet the actual origins were still unknown to me. For this reason I decided to look deeper into the so-called "Watertown Case." I chose this specific case because it seemed to be one of the very first occurrences that began the Protestant Controversy. The main participants in the Watertown Case were on the one hand, the Faculty members of Northwestern College and the Northwestern Board of Control on the other hand. For this reason I decided to make the thrust of this paper the extent to which both of these groups contributed to the beginnings of the Protestant Controversy, by their participation in the "Watertown Case." Now in order to evaluate the roles of the N.W.C. Faculty and the Board of Control, we must first of all look at the details of the Watertown Case. But before I begin to relate the details of the "Watertown Case," let me state that the majority of my material in English was gathered and compiled by the Protestants themselves. The one major exception to this rule is the Centennial Story of Northwestern College by E.E. Kowalke. Now of course, the Centennial Story of N.W.C. is not an original source. And yet, Kowalke was the

President of Northwestern before and after the Watertown Case and as such had a first hand knowledge of the faculty and Board of Control meetings that took place.

The "Watertown Case" revolved around several cases of theft by students at N.W.C. in the late winter and spring of 1924. What made these cases so alarming seems to be not the numbers of boys involved, 24 or 25, (all the sources I read say 24, except Kowalke, who says 25), not the value of what was stolen, although the total stolen was more than petty, not the fact that thefts had occurred both in the dorm and in Watertown. What made these cases of theft so alarming and what necessitated such immediate action in the thinking of the N.W.C. Faculty was that these thefts occurred over such a short span of time. Now of course any sin, theft included, is serious, but this rash of thefts seemed especially serious. These thefts began the "Watertown Case" but really the "Watertown Case" is more concerned with the action of the N.W.C. Faculty and the reaction of the N.W.C. Board of Control. Sometime on or very shortly before March 30, 1924, several students brought to the attention of the dorm tutors, the rumor that there had been frequent cases of thefts by other students in the near past. The dorm tutors seemed to first of all instructed the students that they should first of all get more concrete evidence concerning these allegations of thefts, if indeed they were valid. When these students returned to the tutors with hard evidence, the tutors immediately proceeded to make their own investigation, even waking some of the boys out of their sleep to question them. When they found that

stealing had indeed been going on, they in turn brought the matter to the attention of the N.W.C. Faculty on the morning of March 31, 1924.

The Faculty felt that the situation demanded immediate steps and they acted quickly and decisively. They first of all suspended all classes for the day. As Kowalke says, the Faculty felt that too many boys had been involved in too short of a time to let more time elapse without the Faculty addressing itself to the situation. Also the Faculty felt that they must act quickly to show stealing for what it is, sin and nothing less, because the cases of theft were openly known by merchants and many students in the dorm. The Faculty felt that to delay on their part would foster the idea sin may be taken lightly.

So the Faculty called a meeting for that morning, March 31, 1924. They then look^{ED} over all the evidence, they heard the testimony of the tutors, and then they called in those students who were allegedly involved in the stealing. The first student that they summoned however could not appear since he had the previous evening, returned home. An effort to call the students' parents was made but failed because of an ice storm which downed the telephone lines. This student, who was called but not actually interviewed, may account for the difference of one in the total number of students involved. The Faculty then proceeded to question the students one by one for the purpose of establishing their guilt or innocence, and of if guilty, to the extent to which they were guilty and the extent to which they

acted on their own or were coerced by others into stealing. Throught this investigation, the Faculty took a very evangel-ical attitude toward the students, as far as I can tell. It is my impression from all accounts and from my reverance for certain members of the Faculty, especially Director E.E. Kowalke, that the Faculty wanted mainly to bring the students involved to a knowledge of their sin, to a repentant attitude, and to faith in Jesus as their Savior from this sin also. For these reasons the Faculty openly confronted the students with the charge of stealing. Some students of course, immediately confessed and were assured of their forgiveness. Other students denied the charges until very concrete evidence was brought forward. These students also confessed and were also assured of the Lord's forgiveness. After all the students were heard, the Faculty decided to stand by the rule which had been in effect for quite some time. Stealing meant suspension, period. At this point, the Faculty adjourned for lunch.

When they returned, however, it was decided that a blanket suspension of all the boys involved would not be equitable. It was apparent to the Faculty that those who were involved fell into three general groups. Some boys stole extensively. Some stole only minor items. Some of the boys of course, stole items of moderate value. Also some boys stole of their own volition, while others were encouraged to steal by the bad example of older boys. Some boys received stole goods knowingly. This last seems to have been the case with two room monitors. However, in no case was there any doubt that the boys whom the Faculty interviewed were in all cases indeed guilty of stealing

or receiving stolen goods. As the Faculty found out that there were boys who had stole of their own volition, boys who had stole more than others, and so on, they decided that each boy should be judged individually.

For this reason it came about quite by accident, that the group of 24 boys were divided into three groups of eight. The action to be taken in each case was voted on by the Faculty, which was in some cases unanimous in its decision. Eight boys, who it was determined stole to a very minor extent, were placed on "campus arrest" for the remainder of the school year. They were to be allowed off campus for only the most necessary trips, such as doctor appointments and the like. In some of these cases that ended up in "campus arrest," some of the Faculty members voted against "campus arrest" and in favor of suspension. Another group of eight boys were suspended from school for the remainder of the school year, but would be allowed to return in the fall if they could somehow earn credit for the classes they would of course miss. Because the likelihood of the boys somehow earning credit for the classes they missed seemed rather remote at best, Dr. Ott consistently voted against this measure. He seemed to reason that in effect, the boy was losing the entire school year, and not just the last few weeks. However in these eight decisions, Dr. Ott was in a very extreme minority. The final eight boys, who it was judged were the worst offenders were suspended permanently from school with no hope of returning. In all 24 cases the punishment went into effect immediately.

Parents, of course, were notified by letter as soon as possible.

The dispute that later arose between the Faculty and the Board of Control had its basis, at least partially, on this very point, that the parents of the boys involved were not summoned and were not present when their sons were interviewed. However, as we saw above, the Faculty was hampered by the lack of communications that existed on that day. More importantly, the Faculty felt that these cases had to be dealt with STRONGLY and quickly if the proper pedagogical effect were to be achieved in the entire student body. Also they felt that to delay would only prolong the misery and worry of the boys involved, concerning their future at N.W.C. Finally, there was no doubt whatsoever as to the guilt of the boys involved. The presence of their parents in no way could have altered the facts. And yet this was one point on which the Board of Control found fault with the actions of the Faculty. But I'm getting ahead of myself in the telling of this event.

Following the action of the Faculty, parents of some of the boys involved made immediate appeals to the N.W.C. Board of Control, which action was of course, completely within their rights. Just as quickly it became obvious that the Board of Control was not going to endorse the actions of the Faculty. The Board of Control differed with the Faculty on several points. These points when taken as a whole formed the basis for the Board of Control's reversal of the Faculty's suspensions. Now in order to determine how each side contributed to the rift between the Board of Control and the Faculty, let us look at

the criticisms which the Board of Control brought against the Faculty.

First of all, the Board of Control criticized the Faculty for not calling in the parents of the boys involved. The Board, (henceforth, I will refer to the Board of Control simply as the Board) it seems, felt that the matter was not so serious that it demanded immediate action. They felt that a delay of a few days would not have hurt the situation at all, but would have helped it. The Board very obviously felt that the situation was no where as serious as the Faculty felt it was. It was the position of the Board that there was no need to act without the parents of the boys involved being present.

In somewhat the same line, the Board questioned the investigation that was carried on by the dormitory tutors, which of course led directly to the Faculty's actions. Was it true that the tutors carried on their investigation past midnight even to the point of waking some boys from their sleep? Yes, that did happen! The Board wanted to know why the President had not been present at the investigation by the TUTOR, since he was the dorm inspector. The answer to this question was easy. The President never knew that an investigation was going on. President Kowalke first learned of it on March 31st in the morning. However, this does not tell us why the tutors did not contact the President during their investigation. It sees that the tutors did not see the need for the President to be present or that they simply forgot to notify him. At any rate, this was another point at which the Board found fault with the Faculty, that they

had acted upon information that had been gained without the President's guidance and counsel. In this same line, there were rumors to the effect that "third degree" tactics were used in the questioning. Kowalke states emphatically that such was not the case. He allows that the tutors methods of questioning may not have been the best, but in no way did they badger or harrass any student. Also the Board wanted to know if two students, a Junior and a Senior, participated in the questioning. The answer was no. All these students did was to fetch certain boys whom the tutors wanted to question.

All of these questions mentioned above were discussed extensively by the Board with the President (and) individually the Faculty as a whole. However they did not form the real content of the disagreement between the Board and the Faculty. Basically the Board had two objections. First of all, that the action taken by the Faculty was much too severe. Second, that the Faculty on it's own had no right or authority to suspend students. Only the Board could do that. On these two points, the Faculty and Board never did come to an agreement. The Faculty, of course, very naturally felt that the suspensions were not too harsh. They felt that the situation was grave and did demand strong and quick action on their part. The Board, as I have shown above, felt that the situation was not nearly as serious.

Now it does seem that the greatest majority of the stolen items were of small monetary value, such as candy bars, pencils,

gum, playing cards and so on. Also some of the stealing had occurred in the dormitory and as such, was something ^{THAT} always occurred from time to time. However, I am inclined in this point of the dispute, to go along with the Faculty. It seems to me that the Faculty just had to have a better knowledge of the situation of the dormitory, especially when it is remembered that President Kowalke was also the dorm inspector, that is the Dean of Men, as we would call him today. I fail to see how the Board of Control, which was composed of Pastors and laymen who did not live in the area of Watertown, could know better than the Faculty, what discipline was needed. It seems to me that the Faculty would best know what type of discipline was needed in the dormitory in particular and the entire student body in general. What reason the Board had for feeling that the discipline was too harsh, I do not know. But it is sure that the Board felt that the discipline was indeed too harsh and severe.

The other major point on which the Board challenged the action of the Faculty was the rule that the Faculty had no right or authority to suspend any students. They held that only the Board could take such action. Now on this point the Faculty did not differ with the Board, as to the truth of the statement that only ^{THE BOARD} can suspend students. Rather, the Faculty held that such a rule should not be in existence. They felt, and in this they went back to the previous point of disagreement, that the Faculty is in the best position to judge any situations that might arise in the student body and thus would be able to best dispense the proper discipline.

Now it cannot be disputed that the Board and only the Board had the power to suspend students. That is a hard fact. However, whether or not the Faculty should have this authority, that could be debated. What made this case so unique was the fact that the Board actually exercised its authority as the sole body that could suspend students. For many years the Board had always gone along with the recommendation of the Faculty concerning the suspension of students. However, in the "Watertown Case" the Board felt constrained to overrule the actions of the Faculty with only Dr. Abelman dissenting. The Faculty made one last attempt to forestall the overturning of their actions by the Board. In a very evangelical attitude, truly believing that their actions were what was needed^{ed} in this situation, they suggested that the entire case be referred to the Joint Synodical Conference. The Board however rejected this suggestion also and reinstated all of the suspended students, with the intention that all cases should be reviewed.

This action by the BOARD precipitated the next action, an action that took us one step closer to the entire Protestant Controversy. During the Faculty meetings of March 31, 1924, especially the afternoon meeting the possibility arose that the Board might not ratify the suspensions. In response to this possibility, two members of the Faculty, Prof. Karl Koehler and Herbert Parisius, expressed the sentiment that should the Board overrule the Faculty's decision, then they would have no alternative but to resign. It seems that the other Faculty members tried to persuade Prof. Koehler and Parisius not to resign. But instead of rethink-

ing their intention to resign, they became more adamant. It seems that they felt that if the Board overruled the Faculty then the Board was in effect draining the Faculty of all power and authority at N.W.C. They felt that such an action on the part of the Board would lead to a general decline of discipline in the dormitory. They felt that it would have a very detrimental effect upon the students, in that the students would look upon the Faculty as somebody who talked big but couldn't carry out his threats. When the Board did indeed reinstate all of the suspended boys, Prof. Koehler and Prof. Parisius immediately resigned. However, they both offered their teaching services gratis for the remainder of the school year. The Faculty gladly accepted, mainly for two reasons I believe. First, they did not want to see their colleagues leave and second their departure would have placed an extra burden of work on every other Faculty MEMBER for the remaining two months of school.

However, the Board of Control heard of the offer of the two professors and stated if Koehler and Parisius were allowed to teach they would in effect be setting aside the decision of the Board. It must be said here to the credit of the Board that it did make a very concerted effort to try to persuade the two professors to retract their resignations. However Koehler and Parisius said that their resignations stood. To which the Board replied that their resignations were to become effective immediately.

This then is basically the "Watertown Case." The meetings of boards and committees that followed were almost innumerable.

In no time at all the case of the boys who stole fell into the background and the case of Koehler and Parisius came to the forefront of the Controversy. Very quickly the case grew in scope from the N.W.C. Faculty and Board to the Western Wisconsin District, the Southeastern Wisconsin District, and Northern Wisconsin District and eventually the entire Synod. One of the most famous of the meetings that followed the "Watertown Case" was the meeting at the Withonkita Club in Watertown on June 12, 1924. It was at this meeting that the "Protestants" began to come into notice. At this meeting, which was almost exclusively attended by persons who sided with the two professors, the idea is very prominent that these two professors were completely in the right and the position of the Board was just as completely wrong. Neither was there, it seems to me, any attitude of compromise present among those who later helped to establish the Protestant Conference. They were right, the Board was wrong and thus the Synod was wrong as long as they left the Board decision stand. Nowhere in the transcript of that meeting do you find even the slightest mention or hint that Prof. Koehler and Parisius might not have acted in the wisest manner. This meeting did indeed, as Kowalke writes, form the nucleus of a third party, a party that was opposed to both the Faculty and the Board.

Now of course I could go on with the story. But for the purpose of this paper, I feel that this is sufficient information to judge the "Watertown Case" as one of the origins of the "Protestant Controversy." Certainly everyone involved in the entire case contributed to the beginnings of the Protestant Controversy.

There is no doubt in my mind on that point. The Faculty contributed to the origins of the Protestant Controversy by acting too quickly, by punishing too severely, and by objecting too strenuously to the Board's action. Now this is not to say that the case did not call for quick action on the part of the Faculty. This is not to say that the sins of stealing should have been punished with a proverbial slap on the wrist. What I am saying is that if the Faculty had waited until the parents were notified and present and if the Faculty had been more evangelical in the meeting out of punishment then very possibly, all the controversy could have been avoided.

But what I say about the actions of the Faculty does not exonerate the Board. They also contributed to the origin of the Protestant Controversy. Why did the Board see fit this time to overrule the action of the Faculty? Numerous times previously, the Board had endorsed the actions of the Faculty in cases where discipline was needed. To my way of thinking, it hardly seems possible that the Board could have been in a better position than the Faculty to know what kind of discipline was needed. Now I'm not saying that the Board should not have acted as they saw fit. And yet, if they had not so obviously trampled over the action of the Faculty, if they had accepted the Faculty's suggestion to refer this matter to the Synod, then very possibly the controversy could have been avoided. Most assuredly the Faculty did not use their best judgment in their actions, but neither did the Board. The very point that neither side was willing to compromise, so that finally the Board appealed to its position of

final authority, shows that they both contributed to the origin of the Protestant Controversy.

And yet the Faculty and Board did not contribute completely or even to the larger part to the origin of the Protestant Controversy. On their own, the Board and Faculty would have ironed out their differences as they did indeed do. What took this incident above and beyond the realm of Faculty-Board relations was the actions of Koehler and Parisius in this matter. With their action of resigning, they polarized the dispute, they pushed the Board into a corner. Certainly on the parts of Koehler and Parisius there was no hint of compromise. They appear to be almost cemented in their opposition to the Board as long as the Board did not act as a rubber stamp for the decisions of the Faculty. Their action forced the Board to stick by its decision. Also their action, so to speak, put the "Watertown Case" on the Synodical map. Their resignation was the most significant result of this entire case. Very certainly these Professors greatly contributed to the origin of the Protestant Controversy. They became a rallying point for those who felt as did these two professors. They manifested a very strong opposition to those in ruling positions in our Synod. Their hatred for what they called "officaldom" was first shown in their resignations and others who held the same views quickly ran to their side. Certainly these two professors, and especially Koehler, contributed greatly to the origin of the Protestant Controversy. Following this time, anyone who disagreed with their pastor, with the District, or with the Synod, seemed to gravitate towards this group that began to show itself in the "Watertown

Case." Certainly all of the parties involved must SHARE responsibility. And yet I feel that the most responsibility for making the "Watertown Case" into one of the origins of the Protestant Controversy must lie with Professors Koehelr and Parisius.