

The Intersynodical Controversy through the Eyes of Rev. H. Paul Bauer

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“On each generation a date is imprinted. That date and the events that occurred on it become embedded on a generation’s consciousness and define its era... Few Americans remember anything significant about Thursday, August 17, 1961.”<sup>1</sup> Compared to other landmark dates in American history – dates like December 7, 1941; November 22, 1963; or September 11, 2001 – very few people recall anything significant that happened on August 17, 1961.

And yet, while very few Americans would recall anything specific about that date, for a generation of pastors the significance of that date can hardly be overstated. My grandfather is one of those pastors. On that day an important union within Christendom, a union that had been in place for the better part of a century, was broken. By a vote of 124 to 49, the Wisconsin Synod in convention broke fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. While the specific date of August 17, 1961, is not engraved in my grandfather’s mind,<sup>2</sup> it symbolizes a conflict that is. The date symbolizes a controversy through which my grandfather lived. It symbolizes a controversy on account of which my grandfather his own small place in history, a place that deserves to be remembered. For that reason on November 29, 2007, I sat down with my grandfather to talk about that controversy. When I did, he brought to life a period of history that had previously been a lifeless set of dates, documents, people, and events. I was able to see the Intersynodical Controversy as it ought to be seen – through the eyes of someone who experienced it.

Hildebert Paul Bauer was born in Mission, South Dakota, on October 26, 1923 to Theodor and Hulda Bauer. When he was just nine years old, the Missouri Synod had accepted the *Brief Statement*, “a doctrinal position paper Wisconsin approved of wholeheartedly... The points on Scripture inerrancy and biblical fellowship were just what Wisconsin wanted to hear while those

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<sup>1</sup> Braun, Mark. *A Tale of Two Synods: Events That Led to the Split between Wisconsin and Missouri*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2003) 1.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, when I interviewed him, he wasn’t sure in what year Wisconsin and Missouri broke.

points were under attack, also in Lutheran circles.”<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising, then, that he recalls no indication of a deteriorating relationship between Missouri and Wisconsin all the way through his college years.

However, that quickly changed upon his enrollment at Wisconsin’s Seminary in the spring of 1945. In 1938 the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod had begun discussions with the American Lutheran Church regarding a possible declaration of fellowship. In 1941 the United States entered World War II. This led to another point of contention between Missouri and Wisconsin – the military chaplaincy. Finally, disagreement over scouting was a third source of tension between the two synods. During his years at the Seminary, he and his classmates were prepared by their professors to deal with a deteriorating relationship with big brother Missouri.

However, I can hardly believe my grandfather was prepared for the fact that the controversy and issues surrounding it would have the impact they did on his life, family, and ministry. His first three years in the ministry, serving in Dupree, South Dakota, provided no indication that they would. However, his second call, to Minocqua and Woodruff, Wisconsin, was impacted largely by the scouting issue. “With patriotism at an all-time high following the United States’ victory in World War II and with the rise of anti-Communist paranoia, the synod’s rejection of what was widely considered a wholesome, patriotic group seemed clearly out of step.”<sup>4</sup> My grandfather quickly found that to be the case.

His involvement in the Intersynodical Controversy became even more significant in 1955. “One would have to go back as far as 1868 for a synodical convention to equal that of 1955 in significance for the inter-church scene.” My grandfather was a delegate at that convention. He was

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<sup>3</sup> Fredrich, Edward C. *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: A History of the Single Synod, Federation, and Merger*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992) 199.

<sup>4</sup> Braun 120.

convinced that the time to break with Missouri had come. Even though his synod disagreed, he was still convinced he could remain a member of the synod without violating God's Word.

In the next few years, the controversy continued. So did my grandfather's ministry. After three years near Austin, MN, he accepted a call to serve at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in North Platte, NE. During his time in North Platte, the controversy between Wisconsin and Missouri dramatically altered the course of his life. During those years he became convinced that he could no longer remain a member of the synod without violating God's Word.

Whatever historical judgments can be made about the Wisconsin Synod or the pastors who left it, one thing can be stated with certainty. Leaving the Wisconsin Synod was not an easy decision. I hardly know enough about the controversy to stand in judgment of the actions taken by the Wisconsin Synod or my grandfather. However, without any reservations I admire the courage it took to stand up for what he thought was right. The years spent apart from the Wisconsin Synod were not easy years.

Once he and the small group of Christians in North Platte left the Wisconsin Synod, joining the Church of the Lutheran Confession seemed a logical and inevitable next step. And so they did just that. However, the CLC did not provide the ultimate solution that my grandfather or the people he shepherded were seeking. "The CLC contended and still contends that [admonishing an erring church body] can only be done, once the error is marked, outside the framework of fellowship."<sup>5</sup> That position was not the position held by my grandfather or his congregation. Pretty soon they were once again a congregation without a synod.

In the meantime, the Wisconsin Synod did what my grandfather believed it should have done six years earlier. It broke with the Missouri Synod. The events of 1961 by no means prompted an immediate reconciliation of all differences between him and his former synod.

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<sup>5</sup> Fredrich 207.

However, when he left the CLC, he definitely recognized an opportunity. Eventually, without much hesitation, he and his congregation decided to return to the Wisconsin Synod church in North Platte.

Since that congregation was being served by another pastor, my grandfather figured he would be out of the public ministry for good. However, he was able to reenter the Wisconsin Synod Ministerium through the colloquy process. He served the Lord in the synod of his childhood for almost twenty more years before he retired in 1988.

During the Intersynodical Controversy, there were many difficult decisions made by the men in our synod. Sinful human beings will never make those difficult decisions perfectly. Neither will they always make them with the right motives or in the right manner. However, through studying the Intersynodical Controversy and through interviewing my grandfather, I am convinced that God blessed his church tremendously during those years through the pastors of our synod. Whether they thought we broke too soon or broke too late, whether they left for the CLC or stayed, they were men who acted with conviction. They did what they believed was in accord with God's Word, and they did so regardless of the consequences. Perhaps the words Rev. James Schaefer used to defend the actions of his synod apply well to the actions of those who left her for the CLC: "Our approach may not have always been with the proper regard for Christian humility—and for this we have repented a thousand times—but in the matter of the life and death of precious souls committed to our charge indifference ought to be deplored rather than zeal."<sup>6</sup> May God grant my generation of pastors the zeal he granted my grandfather's.

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Braun, page 332.

## Bibliography

Bauer, H. Paul. Personal interview with author. Lake Mills, WI, November 29, 2007.

Braun, Mark. *A Tale of Two Synods: Events That Led to the Split between Wisconsin and Missouri*. Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2003.

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