

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

STRANGERS TO SISTERS: THE GROWTH OF FRATERNAL RELATIONS  
BETWEEN THE WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD AND THE  
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD  
BETWEEN 1917-1955

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## Introduction

*"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us; we were all going directly to Heaven, we were all going the other way."*  
– Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*<sup>1</sup>

There are perhaps few words better to capture the spirit of Lutheranism in America in the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It was an age of true ecumenism as well as false. It was an age of staunch confession as well as vacillating compromise. For some it was a season of light, for others it was the season of darkness.

For a small band of faithful Lutheran confessors, gathered in the lobby of the Aberdeen Hotel in St. Paul, MN, on a hot day in early June of 1917, it truly was a season of darkness. The Evangelical Lutheran Synod<sup>2</sup>, the confessional heir of the Norwegian Synod, rose like a phoenix from the ashes of unionism that day. Six decades earlier, Norwegian Lutherans, appreciative of historic Lutheran practice and zealous in the defense of pure Lutheran doctrine, had founded a confessional Lutheran synod. The confessional consciousness of its founders was already evident in the immediate removal of the “Grundtvigian error” from the first draft of its constitution. Almost two decades before the Synodical Conference was founded, the Norwegians alone stood in complete agreement in doctrine and practice with the Missouri Synod.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: Signet Classics, 1960), 7.

<sup>2</sup> The official name of the church body formed from the remnants of the Norwegian Synod was the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church. In 1955, the church body officially changed their name to the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. For sake of unity of terminology and the perspective of the modern reader, I have referred to this body by its modern name throughout, although many of the sources quoted will refer to the synod as the Norwegian Synod.

Yet, the Norwegian Synod suffered heavily from the Election Controversy of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 1880s saw the loss of a full third of their membership as well as a distancing from fellow confessional Lutherans in the Synodical Conference. Soon after the faithful founding fathers (Herman Amberg Preus, Jakob Aal Ottesen, and Ulrik Vilhelm Koren) had been gathered to their Lord, the bulk of the Norwegian Synod was led into an un-Lutheran, un-Scriptural union with the United Church. Only a brave few resisted the tide of “Opjgor” and would gathered at Lime Creek, Iowa in 1918 to form the body now known as the ELS.

There was a somber pallor cast in the lobby of the Aberdeen Hotel that day in June 1917. Their beloved Norwegian Synod was no more. Its death knell had been met by most Norwegian Lutherans with fanfare, parades and raucous applause. The Madison Settlement, having been ratified, had opened the gates of that great citadel of confessional Lutheranism to the enemy. Now there was but one Norwegian Lutheran Church. But as visibly impressive as she now was, she was infected with the cancer of false doctrine. As that cancer metastasized, she would be rendered unrecognizable to her founders.

Now but a handful of faithful Lutheran pastors and parishes remained, resistant to the merger because of the false doctrine it endorsed. They were without college or seminary. They were without money or organization. But though hard-pressed, they were not crushed. Though perplexed, they were not in despair. Though persecuted, they were not abandoned. Though struck down, they were not destroyed.<sup>3</sup> The Lord of the Church was with them, and they knew it. One of those present at that meeting would later reminisce,

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<sup>3</sup> Paraphrase of II Corinthians 4:8-9.

On the Sunday forenoon, while the great union jubilee was being held at the St. Paul auditorium, we gathered with the Fairview Congregation in a small building in Minneapolis for services. The pastor, Rev. Christian Anderson, conducted the service, and the sermon was preached by the Rev. J. A. Moldstad. It was the First Sunday after Trinity and the Gospel text for the day was Luke 16:19-31 [the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus].

We were free, we were unafraid, and we were happy. We felt that the Lord was with us and that His grace was abundant...

It was a small beginning and without temporal means, but God's blessings have been showered upon us.<sup>4</sup>

From these humble beginnings, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod has grown to synod of almost 100 congregations. In addition, they maintain missions in Peru, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic. Also, they operate Bethany Lutheran College and Seminary in Mankato, MN. The confession of those faithful few in 1917 still resounds today in the ELS, as they boldly proclaim Christ alone, Scripture alone and faith alone almost a century later.

While the Madison Settlement was decimating confessional Lutheranism among the Norwegians in this country, a very different mood was found in three German Lutheran Synods. In that summer, the long planned merger between the Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin Synods became a reality. In contrast to the developed Lutheran consciousness of the Norwegian Synod, these synods had been historically "mild" Lutherans, maintaining cordial relations with the Reformed in this country through their ties to the mission societies of Germany. Even in the Wisconsin Synod's original

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<sup>4</sup> *Built on the Rock: The Evangelical Lutheran Synod Seventy-Fifth Anniversary 1918-1993*, ed. Juul Madson and Herbert Larson [Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1993], 63-64.

constitution, the reference to the Lutheran Confessions was crossed out and the words, “pure, Bible Christianity” and “pure, Bible Word” were written above it.<sup>5</sup>

Only in the subsequent years, after the arrival of confessionally-minded men like John Bading, Adolph Hoenecke, and Philip Koehler in the Wisconsin Synod; C.J. Albrecht and John Henry Sieker in the Minnesota Synod; Christopher Eberhardt and Stephen Klingmann in the Michigan Synod; did these synods make their long, hard turn toward a confessional Lutheran position. By the late 1860s, the Wisconsin Synod had cut ties with the unionistic mission societies of Germany which had funded much of her early work. Also, both Minnesota and Wisconsin had removed themselves from the General Council for doctrinal reasons (Michigan would leave the General Council in the 1880s, also for confessional reasons). By 1868, fellowship with the Missouri Synod was established, and by 1872, the Wisconsin and Minnesota Synods were two of the constituting members of the original Synodical Conference.

In the years leading up to the Wisconsin merger of 1917, the three synods had been organized into a federation. Oddly enough, the federation had been the thrust of the smaller Minnesota and the Michigan Synods, approaching the larger and geographically central Wisconsin Synod about pooling their resources for worker training. The years of federation allowed the synods to get to know each other. Once initial mistrust and misgivings were settled, it became clear that duplicating efforts was not the best use of resources. Thus the path for merger was set. With the exception of an argument over the status of Michigan Lutheran Seminary, the merger went through smoothly, resulting in what is today the third largest Lutheran church body in America.

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<sup>5</sup> John Braun. *Together in Christ: A History of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Milwaukee; Northwestern Publishing House, 2000), 5.

At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) remain the strong voices of confessional Lutheranism in North America. The unity of their fellowship and the staunchness of their confession have stood in stark contrast to the liberal, secular spirit which imbues the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the devastating fighting and fragmentation within the Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod. Not only has the Lord of the Church blessed the WELS and the ELS with unity of conviction and fellowship, but He has also used these church bodies as a means of uniting confessional Lutherans around the world into the Conference of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (CELC).

And yet any historian must marvel that this unity and the blessings that have resulted from it occurred at all. The bond that exists today was anything but certain in the summer of 1917. Take for instance the strength of the fraternal relationships with the original members of the Synodical Conference. While the original Synodical Conference Synods were all agreed in doctrine and practice, the Wisconsin and Minnesota Synods did not have the personal connections with Missouri that the Norwegian and Ohio Synods had. The Norwegians and Missourians had, from the beginning, a strong fraternal and confessional respect for each other. The Ohio Synod had conferred an honorary doctorate upon C.F.W. Walther, the energetic founder of the Missouri Synod.

On the other hand, the Wisconsin and Minnesota Synods were looked at with some suspicion and ridiculed at times before, during, and even after the formation of the Synodical Conference. For instance, Missouri and Norwegian Synod churches in



Minnesota had reservations about the confessional soundness of the Minnesota Synod.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Walther spoke of the Wisconsin Synod's decision not to support his state synod plan, as well as their decision to re-open their own seminary in Milwaukee, as "*wiedergottlich*."<sup>7</sup> If one were a betting man at the dawn of 1877, the safe bet for a line of possible fracture in the Synodical Conference would have been with Wisconsin-Minnesota on one side and Missouri-Ohio-Norwegians on the other.

Yet all that changed with the Election Controversy. Wisconsin and Minnesota came rallying to the defense of Walther through the sound dogmatic and exegetical work of Adolph Hoenecke. Suddenly the Wisconsin Synod to Walther was "his dear Wisconsin Synod." In contrast, the firm relationship with the Norwegians was greatly strained due to the Norwegian Synod's professor F.A. Schmidt's rabble rousing against Walther's presentation of the doctrines of election and conversion. The loss of the Norwegians from official membership in the Synodical Conference hurt Walther deeply.<sup>8</sup> Ohio too would line up against Missouri and Wisconsin, thus making once distant brothers close and once close brothers distant.

In addition to this, it is extremely hard to establish any direct communication between the constituent synods of the WELS and the Norwegian Synod. One looks almost in vain to find any recorded impressions of the WELS toward the Norwegians or visa versa. The Norwegian Synod's relation with the Wisconsin Synod is at best classified as "the friend of a friend," with Missouri playing the intermediary. Outside

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<sup>6</sup> Edward C. Fredrich, "A Few, Faithful in Few Things: Our Synod's Fathers and the Formation of the Synodical Conference" Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary On-Line Essay File. <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/FredrichFew.pdf> (last accessed January 14, 2009). 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> Edward C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000), 58.

<sup>8</sup> S.C. Ylvisaker, "The Missouri Synod and the Norwegians." In *Ebenezer: A Review of the Work of the Missouri Synod during Three-Quarters of a Century*, ed. William Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922), 271.

some joint work in the Synodical Conference Negro Mission and the short-lived Wittenberg Academy<sup>9</sup> there is very little direct contact recorded between the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods.

Moreover, in the years leading up to the Norwegian merger (1911-1917), most references to the Wisconsin Synod by the Norwegian Synod or to the Norwegian Synod by the Wisconsin Synod are negative. For instance, in 1912 John Schaller of the Wisconsin Synod wrote and published in the *Quartalschrift* a detailed analysis of the weaknesses of the Madison Settlement. Schaller's article was interpreted as an attack against the Norwegian Synod by H.G. Stub, then president of the Norwegian Synod and the motivating force behind the merger. Stub later filed a protest against Schaller in the Synodical Conference and used Schaller as a straw man in his agenda to distance the Norwegian Synod from the influence of the Synodical Conference.<sup>10</sup>

So what brought these two synods, ELS and WELS, so different in culture, language, and historical development and with a touchy history before 1917, into the fraternal and confessional relationship they share today? What made these strangers into sisters? A cursory explanation will credit the Missouri Synod as the force that brought

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<sup>9</sup> Wittenberg Academy was a joint educational endeavor of the Norwegian, Wisconsin, and Missouri Synods in Wittenberg, WI. The academy only operated from 1901-13. While the majority of students who attended there studied for practical professions, there were also courses designed for students going on to Luther College, Decorah, IA and the Concordia System. Three influential graduates from this institution would be Pastor Adolph Zuberbier ('05), Wisconsin Synod pastor and missionary to the Apaches; Pastor Norman Madson ('06), ELS pastor and the first Bethany Theological Seminary Dean; Pastor Paul Kretzmann ('06), pastor and professor in the LCMS, author of *Popular Commentary*, and later founder of the Orthodox Lutheran Conference. Of members of the faculty, Wittenberg Academy's principal, E.J. Onstad would go on to be a charter member of the ELS and teach at Bethany Lutheran College; E.H. Buerger would go on to serve as principal of Milwaukee Lutheran High School for 26 years (1923-1949); J.T. Mueller would go on to serve as a professor at Concordia Theological Seminary-St. Louis and author numerous books including *Christian Dogmatics*.

<sup>10</sup> Schaller (along with Professors Franz Pieper and W.H.T. Dau from the LCMS) had originally been chosen as part of a three-man committee from the Synodical Conference to try to plead with the Norwegian Synod to refrain from the merger. Schaller, due to his article, was replaced shortly afterward by Benjamin Schleutter.

these two synods into closer contact with each other. Similarly, Missouri's subsequent departure from its historic, scriptural, and confessional position had the inevitable effect of drawing these two synods into a more intimate relationship.

Yet, the closer this explanation is compared to the available evidence the sooner one sees that Missouri's role alone cannot explain why the WELS and the ELS grew so close together. This "Missouri-hypothesis" does not explain why the ELS, as a whole, consciously refrained from joining conservative break-off groups from the Missouri Synod, like the Orthodox Lutheran Conference or why a relatively small number of their congregations joined the Church of the Lutheran Confession. It also cannot explain why Wisconsin in 1935 sought out the ELS' opinion first when discussing how to formulate a reply to the Open Invitation of President Knubel of the ULCA. It also cannot explain why both the WELS and ELS were snubbed by the ALC in its invitation to discuss fellowship with Missouri. It cannot explain the ELS' vigorous defense of the WELS' doctrine of church and ministry against conservative LCMS voices in the *Confessional Lutheran* like John Buenger and Paul Kretzmann.

It is the assertion of this thesis, therefore, that what truly has bonded the WELS and ELS together is a common hermeneutical approach to the Holy Scriptures, which makes direct study of the Scriptures primary to the confessional writings or the opinions of the fathers. While both synods greatly valued and upheld the Lutheran Confessions, while they honored the writings of the orthodox fathers, they both realized that the Scriptures alone define the doctrine and practice of the Church. It was this firmly fixed hermeneutical principle that bound these two synods together. As they grew to understand each other, they realized that they talked the same hermeneutical language,

while increasingly other Lutherans, even those with whom they had shared long and blessed fellowships, spoke with a different spirit and a different language.

The years 1917-1955 saw the conscious reaffirmation of the *Sola Scriptura* hermeneutic in both the WELS and the ELS. In the WELS, it was era of the Wauwatosa Theology. In the ELS, it was the era of “the Norwegian Hermeneutic.” Through a series of practical problems, educational endeavors, and doctrinal controversies, the Lord of the Church brought the WELS and ELS to recognize each other as kindred spirits in their approach to the Holy Scriptures. The call to defend and cling to the teachings of Scripture caused them to stand closer and closer together throughout these years, making strangers into sisters. This thesis will document the steps of that journey from 1917 to 1955, examining the development of the fraternal and confessional relations of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

## **Part I: Getting to know the Scriptures: the Norwegian Hermeneutic and the Wauwatosa Theology**

### Chapter 1: The Norwegian Hermeneutic

The Norwegian hermeneutical method that found active expression in the Norwegian Synod in America was born as a reaction to the rationalism of the Norwegian State Church on the one hand and the pietistic preaching of Haugean revival on the other. The method brought back the true confessional principle of *Sola Scriptura* to the Norwegian State Church, along with a deep appreciation for the Lutheran symbols and the historic practices of the Lutheran Church. This hermeneutical method would be deeply instilled in the founders of the Norwegian Synod; men like Herman Amberg Preus, Jakob Aal Ottesen, Ulrik Vilhelm Koren, who guided the Norwegian Synod through various doctrinal battles, especially the Election Controversy, with their clear, persistent call to the authority of Scripture.

After the demise of the Norwegian Synod to the Madison Settlement of 1917 the leaders of the ELS began a careful re-examining of the events that led to the fall of their beloved church.<sup>11</sup> During this time, men like H.M. Tjernagel, J.E. Thoen, Bjug Harstad, Norman A. Madson, C.A. Moldstad, Christian Anderson and S.C. Ylvisaker would not only show that they stayed faithful to the sound Lutheran hermeneutical principle *Sola Scriptura*, but they would also zealously bring it to the fore in sermons, theological essays, and personal correspondence. The Norwegian Hermeneutic became all the more

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<sup>11</sup> The Madison Settlement brought together the United Norwegian Lutheran Church and the Norwegian Synod, which had been historically separated over a number of issues, but most glaring, was the doctrine of election. The United Norwegian Lutheran Church taught that man is elected *intuitu fidei*, in view of faith, that is that God saw those who would believe and elected those. The Norwegian Synod strongly rejected this because it undermines *Sola Gratia* and makes man in some way responsible for part of his salvation, which is a subtle form of synergism. The Madison Settlement glossed over this difference with the explanation that both synods really held to the same doctrine, but in different forms. Only the minority that went on to form the Evangelical Lutheran Synod insisted that the merger was against the Scripture because it tolerated false doctrine.

important given the tiny size of the re-organized synod. How would the pastors and teachers answer the question, “Are we alone wise among all the Norwegian Lutherans of this country?”

In this era of visible devastation caused by the Madison Settlement, the leaders of ELS were led to study the Scriptures even more deeply. This hermeneutic not only caused them to fully appreciate their doctrinal heritage, but poised the ELS to see deceptions of the union movements that began to threaten and eventually destroy the Synodical Conference. They, like their fathers before them, realized that ecclesiastical chicaneries of false teachers can be unmasked only with sound Scriptural theology.

#### I. Foundations of the Norwegian Hermeneutic: Johnson and Caspari

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Norway was a country deeply divided religiously. On the one hand, the clergy of the state had become infected with the rationalism of continental Europe. Professors like Svend Borchmann Hersleb (1784-1836) and Stener Johannes Stenersen (1789-1835) had brought a moderate Lutheran orthodoxy tinged with scientific rationalism to the Norwegian State Church.<sup>12</sup> This only added to the popular perception of the state church and clergy as being aloof from the people they served, living in a privileged world with an untroubled conscience.<sup>13</sup>

With such popular discontent over the spiritual shepherding of the Norwegian State Church, Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771-1824), a revivalistic lay-preacher, found a ready audience throughout Norway. Although a layman, he preached a message of repentance and regeneration throughout Norway, reviving the backsliders and

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Langlais, “Gisle Johnson and the Johnsonian Awakening: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Norwegian Lutheranism and its importance for America,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 36, no.2 (June 1996), 19.

<sup>13</sup> Langlais, 18.

strengthening and encouraging the faithful.<sup>14</sup> Yet, this movement was not without its problems. First, Hauge greatly confused justification and sanctification. Hauge tended to be legalistic, condemning many things which Scripture had not. Also, the Haugean movement served to further destabilize the state church with lay-preaching that centered mostly on condemnation of the state church and the promotion of pietistic legalism, rather than the proper application of Law and Gospel.

In the midst of these forces of rationalism and pietism, there arose a number of professors at the University of Christiania (Oslo), led by Gisle Johnson (1822-1894), who provided a narrow, yet truly Lutheran, middle way between rationalism and pietism. Johnson and his fellow professor, Carl Paul Caspari (1814-1892), along with the great hymn writer and pastor, Magnus Landstad (1802-1880); Oslo pastor, Johan Christian Heuch (1838-1904); the teacher and Bible translator, O. Christian Thistedahl (1813-1876); and Professor of New Testament Isagogics, Fredrik Bugge (1838-1896), influenced not only the course of the state church of Norway for a number of generations, but greatly influenced the Norwegian Lutherans coming to America.

What came to be known as the Johnsonian Awakening actually began in the classroom of Thistedahl, who taught in the Latin school in Kristiansand.<sup>15</sup> Thistedahl's interest in and encouragement of Johnson to study theology placed Johnson on the path he eventually took,

Johnson later credited Thistedahl with giving him the necessary encouragement and guidance, and accounted his teacher an admirable 'sjalesorger' who has seen him through crises of difficulty and discouragement...He was a non-speculative theologian with a deep respect for the Lutheran theological writings second only to Holy

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<sup>14</sup> Clifford Nelson, *Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 159.

<sup>15</sup> Langlais, 12.

Scripture. He was in short a Biblical theologian whose motto was “*simpliciter standum esse in verbo divino.*” Johnson was to become, like Thistedahl, a Biblical and strongly confessional Lutheran theologian.<sup>16</sup>

Johnson’s academic prowess and theological acumen were recognizable also to the officials at the University of Christiania. Upon his graduation, he was offered a position as professor of theology. Instead of starting service right away, Johnson opted for a year of study in Germany. The year spent in Germany was fruitful on two accounts. The first is that Johnson’s further study in Germany only confirmed his biblical, confessional stance. While in Germany, Johnson came into contact with all the important figures of the confessional revival. But perhaps of greater import was his meeting and subsequent fraternal and professional relationship with a young linguist, theologian, and church historian named Carl Paul Caspari. Their time as professors and lecturers at the University of Christiania would eventually come to define the Norwegian Hermeneutic.

Carl Paul Caspari is one of the greatest linguists that the Lutheran Church has ever known and yet sadly remains in relative obscurity to this day. To illustrate Caspari’s gift for languages, Torald Teigen related the following story about Caspari,

Caspari was traveling incognito with some scholars who were conversing in Latin. When Caspari entered into the conversation in Latin, they switched to Greek; and still trying to throw him off they switched to Hebrew and then to several other less known languages, Caspari speaking the others more fluently than they. Finally one of the travelers said, “Either you are the devil himself or you are Professor Caspari of Christiania.”<sup>17</sup>

Caspari, born in 1814 in Dessau, Germany of Jewish parents, received his earliest training in some of the Jewish schools around Dessau, but later matriculated through the

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<sup>16</sup> Langlais, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Torald Teigen, “A Few Notes on Professor Carl Paul Caspari” *Clergy Bulletin* 15, no.7 (September 1955), 59.



University of Leipzig.<sup>18</sup> His main area of study was Hebrew, but soon he became a master of all Oriental languages, as well as the study of Greek and Latin. When at Leipzig, he studied the New Testament for the first time (in Greek, no less), and his continued study led to his baptism and conversion to the Lutheran faith in 1838.

Upon his conversion, he decided to study theology, and thereby transferred to the University of Berlin, focusing on Old Testament exegesis and studying under Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg. In 1842 he earned his doctorate of philosophy at Leipzig. When offered a position at the University of Koenigsberg, he turned it down because it would have meant that he would have had to join the Union Church of Prussia, something his conscience would not allow. While waiting for a position in Leipzig to open, Caspari met Johnson, who immediately offered him a position at Christiania. Caspari took the offer and remained at Christiania for the next 44 years.

The years of collaboration between Caspari and Johnson at the University of Christiania became known as the Johnsonian Awakening. The theological and religious gap between the rationalists of the state church and the anti-clerical pietists was filled in with sound, biblical, evangelical and confessional doctrine and practice. Not only was the Norwegian State Church affected, but especially the fledgling Norwegian Synod in America, whose founders – Preus, Koren and Ottesen – all sat at the feet of these men and took their theology and theological method with them to America.

What was the hermeneutical method of these men? Historian Clifford Nelson has described the method of Caspari and Johnson as “imbuing...students with a spirit of orthodoxy which blended the passion and subjectivity of a revival preacher with the

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<sup>18</sup> Torald Teigen, *A Few Notes...*, 61.

intellect of an orthodox systematician.”<sup>19</sup> This author would argue that their method is simpler than the one that is described by Nelson. Caspari and Johnson, from their own personal and professional experience, knew that true confessional Lutheranism is born from the direct study of the Scriptures. Their method was nothing more than the method of Luther and his colleagues: *Sola Scriptura*.

The reverence for Holy Scripture as the sole authority for the establishment of articles of faith and the guidance of a Christian is clearly seen in the Johnsonian Awakening. Historian Gerald Belgum gives this glimpse into Johnson’s classroom lectures on the Holy Scriptures,

The accounts of his public lectures, those calm, scholarly expositions of Holy Scripture, were that those classes, some of which lasted for over two hours, were intensely moving. Welle reports that, “the whole assembly trembled when Johnson quietly and with his thin voice quoted the prophet’s words: ‘there is no peace for the ungodly, says my God.’”<sup>20</sup>

Or consider this snapshot of Caspari’s lectures and classroom method, given by Andreas Brandrud, who succeeded Johnson to the chair of Church History at Christiania,

Caspari’s orthodox view of the Bible did not allow him to investigate with complete freedom...He was not a pietist...but he possessed at the same time a deep and child-like piety, which especially lived and breathed in the Bible, not least in the Old Testament, in the piety of the Patriarchs, Prophets, and Psalms. And he understood how to give it impressive expression. None of his hearers could ever forget Caspari as he often stood on the podium expounding upon the Hebrew Psalm or a portion of the Prophets, and with closed eyes and in a scarcely audible

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<sup>19</sup>Nelson, *Lutherans in North America*, 159-160.

<sup>20</sup> Gerald Belgum, “The Old Norwegian Synod in America: 1853-1890.” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1957.), 38.

voice, as in an ecstasy, breathed the holy words out over his hearers.<sup>21</sup>

The earmark of the theological education of the Johnsonian Awakening was the direct, exegetical study of the Scriptures as the source of all Lutheran doctrine and practice. Consider the twin mottos of Caspari and Johnson, which would also serve as the motto for the Norwegian Synod in America: “*gegraptai*” and “*verbum dei manet in aeternum.*” The students who sat at their feet grew to appreciate and hold fast to the Lutheran symbols and Lutheran practice precisely because first they had been so solidly grounded in the study of Scripture, not as an academic exercise, but as a devotional practice by which the Spirit prepared them for their public office. In short, the students of Johnson and Caspari at Christiania received a classical, thoroughly Lutheran education rooted firmly in the study of Scripture.

In addition to this reverent study of Scripture, both Caspari and Johnson instilled in their students a great love and appreciation for the Lutheran symbols, church history, systematic theology and the historic forms of the Lutheran Church. Caspari and Johnson had the Book of Concord translated into Norwegian.<sup>22</sup> Johnson was the author of both a

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<sup>21</sup> Torald Teigen, *A Few Notes...*, 60-61. It should be noted that Brandrud was more “modernist” in his approach to Scripture than his predecessor, thus the criticism for the orthodox way Caspari expounded upon the Scriptures.

<sup>22</sup> The Formula of Concord was not an official confession of the Lutheran Church of Norway or Denmark at this time, though Sweden had officially accepted it as a public confession in 1593. Some attribute this to the political climate of Denmark at that time, which did not want to receive due to political considerations with Reformed countries. Others have simply state that the kind of disputes that happened in Germany after Luther’s death were local German issues that did not really affect the Lutheranism of the rest of Europe at that time. Yet, even though it was never officially accepted, it was nevertheless always considered a thoroughly Lutheran document by confessional Lutherans in the Scandinavian countries. Caspari and Johnson’s translation of the entire Book of Concord into Norwegian is proof of that. It was, therefore, no great leap for the Norwegian Synod to subscribe to the Formula of Concord during the formation of the Synodical Conference. The Synodical Conference proceedings record the following, “But since the honorable Norwegian Synod has attached to its complete assent to the constitution the question whether it could enter the Synodical Conference as a member, even though as an individual synod it pledged itself, as is well known, only to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and Luther’s Small Catechism, the explanation was given that the Scandinavian Lutherans has always been regarded as orthodox, even though not all

church history text, *Dogmehistorie*, and a dogmatics text, *Grundrids af den systemantiske Theologi*.<sup>23</sup> Caspari also did important work investigating the source of the Apostle's Creed in order to react to the Grundtvigian assertions that so troubled the Scandinavian churches of his day.

One final note about the influence of Johnson and Caspari: even within the context of their devout piety and staunch orthodoxy, they zealously defended Christian liberty,

[Johnson]'s piety never lost sight of Christian liberty, and he never tended toward moralism or perfectionism in any form. He loved his pipe and was unwilling to condemn dancing, always avoiding legalism that some of his followers fell into, followers whom, by the way, were also frequently affected by Haugeanism. In those that were balanced, like Johnson himself, we discover a marvelous combination of Lutheran doctrinal orthodoxy with its concomitant devotional expression that can only be considered as being likewise orthodox.<sup>24</sup>

The Norwegian-American pastors, Herman Amberg Preus, Ulrik Vilhem Koren, and Jakob Aal Ottesen inherited this evangelical balance of theology while sitting at the feet of Gisle Johnson and Carl Paul Caspari. S.C. Ylvisaker, in commemoration of the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Norwegian Synod, expressed the debt that the Norwegian Synod founders had to the men of the Johnsonian Awakening,

We thank God Who raised up men of faith and conviction  
and Christian courage to help stem the tide of error and

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symbolical books have achieved official ecclesiastical recognition among them; nevertheless, the Synodical Conference naturally demands that the honorable Norwegian Lutheran Synod, in so far as it is a part of the Synodical Conference, pledge itself to all the confessional writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and in the event of doctrinal controversy to be guided and judged thereby. Since this was agreed to by the representatives of the honorable Norwegian Synod, the Conference found no impediment to its acceptance." Edward Fredrich, "The Formula of Concord in the History of American Lutheranism," Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary On-Line Essay File, <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/FredrichConcord.pdf> (Last accessed July 7, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Erwin L. Lueker et al. *Lutheran Cyclopedia*. St. Louis: CPH, 1975. 431.

<sup>24</sup> Langlais, 17.

unbelief, in recent times such men as Johnson, Caspari, Thistedahl, Bugge, Heuch, Landstad to mention only some.<sup>25</sup>

## II. The Norwegian Hermeneutic in the Old Norwegian Synod (1853-1910)

A detailed examination of the history and writings of the great Norwegian troika (Preus, Koren, and Ottesen) reveals that for almost 60 years, the Norwegian Hermeneutic found active and agile expression in the sermons, theological writings, and doctrinal defenses of these men. One can only understand the doctrinal contentiousness of the founding fathers of the Norwegian Synod only if one understands the deep reverence with which they held the Holy Scriptures,

The founders of the Norwegian Synod were from the beginning zealous for the truth of God's Word in all its parts and were not willing to compromise one iota of its teachings, whether they concerned the fundamental doctrines of salvation or matters of the law or of church polity. Their teachings were the teachings of the Bible, nothing more, nothing less.<sup>26</sup>

Herman Amberg Preus, the long time president of the Norwegian Synod, clearly articulated this devotion to the Holy Scriptures in his 1869 presidential address to the Norwegian Synod convention,

The Word is not ours which we can do with as might please us. It is the Word of the holy, righteous God which He has in grace and indescribable love committed to us pure and unadulterated which we therefore are to proclaim pure and unadulterated, without addition, without suppression, without obscuring, without distortion, and which we are to preserve unfalsified and unabridged as our most precious heritage to our descendants.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> S.C. Ylvisaker. *Grace for Grace: A Brief History of the Norwegian Synod* (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1943), 8.

<sup>26</sup> Ylvisaker, *Grace for Grace*, 135.

<sup>27</sup> Herman Amberg Preus, Presidential address given to the 10<sup>th</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod, Spring Grove, WI, June 17-27, 1869.

The Holy Scriptures were the precious heritage delivered into their hands without taint or error by God's grace. The Norwegian men realized that the main theological task of the synod was to preach the revealed truth and defend against any deviations from that revelation. But to simply accede to the nature and power of Scripture was not enough. The synod's motto "gegraptai" must not simply to be a slogan, but it must find living expression among laity and clergy alike. The only way to avoid the pits of rationalism and pietism was the faithful use of the Holy Scriptures. They must never run from or compromise with error, but standing boldly on the Scriptures, defend the church from false doctrine.

The Norwegian Hermeneutic sought not only to correctly understand and formulate the doctrines revealed in the Scriptures, but also to apply them privately and publicly, both in law and gospel, so the enemies of the church might be thwarted, the lusts of the flesh killed, and the new man built up and renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Herman Amberg Preus, in the midst of the Election Controversy, called upon a divided Norwegian Synod to do just that,

O that we therefore, brethren, now that we come together here, might together with our congregations make a sincere, righteous repentance from the heart and in our deepest distress cry to him: "Return, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine; and the vineyard which your right hand planted, and the Son, whom you made strong for yourself - so will we not go back from you; let us live, and we will call upon your name. LORD God of hosts! Turn us, let your face shine, so we are saved," Psalm 80:12-20.

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<http://www.evangelicallutheralsynod.org/publications/essays/hapreus-18a/5.html>. (Accessed July 19, 2008).

So will we cling fast to the Lord more zealously and call upon his help since we know that the evil foe will do everything possible in order to demolish our church and to deprive us of the Word of truth. But if we thus lift up our eyes unto the hills from whence help shall come to us, then our meeting here shall not be in vain. Then the Lord himself shall be with us and bless our decisions, let our work prosper, and preserve us in unity of the Spirit on the ground of truth because he has promised that *the way of the righteous shall prosper*. Let it be so, O God, for your mercy's sake in Christ Jesus! Amen.<sup>28</sup>

Among the pastors and theologians of the Old Norwegian synod, there is also a healthy spiritual desire to remove façade and get to the truth, to look past the physical and temporal to the spiritual and eternal. Only when one not only confesses properly but lives that confession, then, and only then, does true faith find expression. Koren, in his last synodical address, commented,

No, if we are Christians in the Scriptural sense, it is because we have actually come to Christ and to faith in him; from this again it follows that we will gladly help to draw others also to Him and to faith in him, in order that both we, ourselves and others with us may be enabled to abide with Him. This demands all our effort and all our attention. If this is not the purpose, then all our institutions and our churches, with what belongs to them, are meaningless or even worse - False pretenses; for we *say* this is what we want.

However, nothing is easier and more frequent in occurrence than that we sink into a careless habit which forgets the aim and lets itself be satisfied with the mere form. If we do this, the reason is that we have not considered seriously, much less, realized, what the Word of God is. If we try to explain what it really is, we shall find ourselves over whelmed by the thought of its greatness. For the Word of God must be the expression or revelation of the thoughts of God and of

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<sup>28</sup> Herman Amberg Preus. Presidential address given to the 20<sup>th</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod, Minneapolis, MN, June 18-25, 1884. <http://www.evangelicalluthersynod.org/publications/essays/hapreus-18a/15.html>. (Accessed June 19, 2008).

the will of God. Hence, God's Word must be infallible as God himself...

The Word of God, then is a real thing, all that belongs to Christianity is practical. Nothing is merely theory or speculation. This condemns all Pharisaism which lets itself be satisfied with external form...

Now when the real value and content of the Word of God is forgotten, only the sound of it or the shell remains.<sup>29</sup>

This desire among the Norwegians to remove orthodoxist artifice so that true orthodoxy can live and breathe can partly be traced to the effect Soren Kierkegaard's writings had on Scandinavian Lutherans. While Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is known today primarily as a philosopher, in his day he was a voice of protest against the blatant hypocrisy and rationalism that infected the Scandinavian state churches. Koren, in his reminiscences, comments on the effect Kierkegaard had on him and others,

His influence showed itself for the most part in the spiritual sphere and personal activity which he called forth in his readers; a more idealized view of life and man; in every domain, an intellectual consideration; a view of the disparity between the essence of Christianity and the world; an exposure of all kinds of "sham" and humbug...an unconditional obedience to God's Word and submission to it. Thereby emerged a view of the requisites for the pastoral office and a view of the pitiful caricatures so often to be found in the office, whether it be the good-natured clergyman who is spiritually asleep while he, however, eats and drinks and sleeps and carries on the functions of his office like any other business – or be it the gifted preacher who "with daring boldness of the speaker" draws his hearers along, in wonderment over the beautiful and touching words which neither he nor they have any use for as soon as the sermon has been concluded.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> U.V. Koren, "On Using the Word of God," final presidential address to the Norwegian Synod, 1909. <http://www.blts.edu/essays/korenUV/On%20Using%20the%20Word%20of%20God.pdf>. (Accessed July 21, 2008), 1-2.

<sup>30</sup> U.V. Koren, "Memories of My Youth and Early Times in America." Translation by C.M. Gullerud. *Journal of Theology* 32, no. 2 (June 1992), 4.



Koren sees Kierkegaard as a one who helped form a fitting mindset when approaching the work of the church. Yet, Koren also was quick to recognize that Kierkegaard's greatest weakness was that he never contributed any objective basis for his subjective views. But with the instruction of Johnson and Caspari, as well as a solid reading of Luther, the men of the Norwegian Synod were properly grounded in Lutheran theology as they began their ministry in America.<sup>31</sup>

The desire for pure Lutheran doctrine and practice is clearly seen already in the re-writing of the original constitution of the Norwegian Synod. The first Norwegian pastors in this country, Claus Clausen and J.W.C. Dietrichson, were heavily influenced by Grundtvig and the errors he advocated.<sup>32</sup> They had inserted Grundtvigian language in the first draft of the Norwegian Synod's constitution,

The doctrine of the Church is that which is revealed through God's holy Word *in our baptismal covenant* and also in the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, interpreted in agreement with the Symbolic writings of the Church of Norway.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, the arrival of new pastors in 1852, most notably Herman Amberg Preus and Jakob Aal Ottesen, along with Nils Brant and H.A. Stub, and in 1853, Ulrik Vilhem Koren, brought about an immediate change. These men were fully committed to confessional Lutheranism and the confessional principle "Sola Scriptura." They

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<sup>31</sup> Koren, *Memories*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Danish pastor and noted hymn-writer Nikolai Grundtvig (1783-1872), although he had broken from the rationalism of the Danish state church, had moved from the "Sola Scriptura" principle of the Lutheran Confessions. He sought to form an apologetic for orthodox Lutheranism on the basis of the "Living Word" that had been confessed down through the ages by the church in the form of the Apostles' Creed. He despaired of defending the faith through the use of the written Scriptures, feeling that it had been destroyed beyond repair by rationalism.

<sup>33</sup> Ylvisaker, *Grace for Grace*, 36.

immediately recognized the Grundtvigian error and removed the words “*in our baptismal covenant*” be stricken from the second paragraph of the constitution.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, the Norwegian hermeneutical approach is seen in the Synod’s early fellowship with other Lutheran bodies in America. In 1855, Nils Brant and Jakob Ottesen made inquiries for suitable Lutheran education to supply pastors and teachers for the rapidly growing settlements of Norwegian Lutherans in the Midwest. Their confessional consciousness and faithfulness guided them in their search. Even though it had been a Buffalo Synod pastor who had ordained the first Norwegian Synod pastor in America, Brant and Ottesen rejected the Buffalo Synod seminary due to its Romanizing view of church and ministry. Despite the Ohio Synod’s warm offer of Capitol Seminary in Columbus for Norwegian use, the Synod turned down the offer due to an uncertainty of Ohio’s doctrinal position. J.A. Ottesen wrote in *Maanedstidende*, October 1852,

If it is important for individuals who desire to enjoy church fellowship with one another to have one faith and confession, then the same must be the case in a still greater degree in the case of groups of individuals, of synods, since the opposing forces, if disagreement arises, are so much greater and thus the damage they could inflict upon one another correspondingly more dangerous.<sup>35</sup>

But the Norwegians found a kindred spirit in the Missouri Synod. Soon the negotiations of Brant and Ottesen with Walther produced an arrangement not only concerning fellowship, but also concerning the training of pastors for the Norwegian Synod. At the 1864 convention of the Norwegian Synod, with Walther, Craemer and Sihler representing the Missouri Synod, President Preus commented in his address,

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<sup>34</sup> The first Norwegian Synod was organized in 1851. However, with the arrival of the anti-Grundtvigians and the removal of the error, thus changing one of the unalterable articles of the constitution, the first synod was dissolved in 1852. It was later reorganized with a new constitution in 1853.

<sup>35</sup> Ylvisaker, *Ebenezer*, 264.

We acknowledge with gratitude toward God that one German Lutheran synod, the Missouri Synod, has not been satisfied only to bear the Lutheran name, but has unhesitatingly brought forth the testimonies of the Lutheran fathers, without fear held aloft the banner of the Lutheran church, pure doctrine, zealously guarded it within the synod itself, and with boldness and courage as well as with learning, defended it against external enemies...And when we rejoice in fraternal relations...we are certain that they, by the gracious help of God will remain, as they have been, as blessed consequence to us in our endeavor to know and hold fast the pure doctrine and to abide by the Word of God.<sup>36</sup>

For a century (1855-1955) the Norwegian synod and its theological heirs enjoyed a warm, fraternal relationship with the Missouri Synod. ELS historian Theodore Aaberg even defined the relationship between the Missourians and the Norwegians as Jonathan-David like.<sup>37</sup> A feeling of sincere, mutual regard sprang up, all the more genuine because it was based on real unity of faith.<sup>38</sup>

The Norwegian Synod would suffer mightily for their pure, Lutheran orthodoxy which flowed from their approach to Scripture. Sven Oftedal, professor of the Norwegian-Danish Conference, attacked the Norwegian Synod with as much venom as he could muster when he described them as, “worm-eaten by Latinism, washed out by monarchism, frozen stiff with orthodoxism...swallowed by Missouri.”<sup>39</sup> But history has

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<sup>36</sup> Ylvisaker, *Ebenezer*, 266.

<sup>37</sup> Theodore Aaberg, *A City Set on a Hill* (Lake Mills: Graphic Publishing Company, 1968), 83.

<sup>38</sup> Ylvisaker, *Ebenzer*, 266.

<sup>39</sup> U.V. Koren, “Why is There No Unity among the Norwegians? An Answer to Mr. Ulvsted and Many Others.” <http://www.blts.edu/essays/korenUV/No%20Church%20Unity.pdf>. (Accessed July 21, 2008), 14-15. One of the proofs put forth by the Norwegian-Danish Conference and later the Anti-Missourian Brotherhood for this charge of the Norwegian Synod being a puppet of the Missouri Synod was its adherence to the Formula of Concord. However, as was shown above (footnote 22), the Norwegian men who had studied under Johnson and Caspari had already accepted the Formula of Concord as a thoroughly Lutheran document. Koren answers the charges of the critics of the Norwegian Synod in this way, “We have, therefore, many opportunities to see that those who attack the old Lutheran doctrine have no better defense than to say that *The Book of Concord* was not accepted in the Norwegian State Church. That it has always been accepted among all true Lutherans – that does not matter in the least. They wanted to have unbridled freedom for their own fancy and opinions...The difference between *The Augsburg Confession*

shown this accusation to be untrue and unjustified. Koren himself stated in response to these charges, “We have not learned anything new from them (Missouri), i.e., any new doctrine or any doctrine other than that which we had with us from the University of Christiania.”<sup>40</sup> Professor Erling Teigen of Bethany Lutheran College has further silenced these charges,

Several historical treatments have asserted that the Norwegian Synod first came under the spell of Walther and the Missourians, and then became hyperconfessionalists. This lie is quickly put to rest by the statement found in the 1851 and 1853 constitutions. In 1858, C.F.W. Walther read his paper on confessional subscription where he outlined the strict, unconditional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions in similar words, four years after the Norwegians and Missourians had officially discovered each other.<sup>41</sup>

The Norwegian Synod commitment to pure doctrine and sound practice was displayed in numerous controversies during the first decades of its existence: lay-preaching, sabbatarianism, the biblical understanding of slavery, absolution, the gospel and objective justification, and election. What is important to note about each of these issues is that the founders of the Synod always sought to answer the controversy by examining the Scriptures and holding up the pure doctrine that was found therein. Many times they insisted on biblical teaching despite a contrary mood of the vast majority of their congregations and at great personal cost to them.<sup>42</sup>

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and *The Formula of Concord*...lies in this, that the hour-hand can never be as exact as the minute hand.” Ulrik Vilhelm Koren, “The Book of Concord” in *Truth Unchanged, Unchanging: Selected Sermons, Addresses and Doctrinal Articles by Ulrik Vilhelm Koren*, ed. The Evangelical Lutheran Synod Translation Committee (Lake Mills: Graphic Publishing Company, 1978), 168-169.

<sup>40</sup> Koren, *Why is There No Unity among the Norwegians*, 12.

<sup>41</sup> Erling Teigen, “Jakob All Ottesen and the Enduring Legacy of Preus, Koren and Ottesen” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (March 2005), 95.

<sup>42</sup> Take for example the physical deposition of Herman Amberg Preus and his son Christian Keyser Preus for their refusal to accede to the unscriptural “intuitu fidei” demanded by the members of their

Of the founders of the Norwegian Synod, it was Ulrik Vilhelm Koren who most succinctly and clearly elucidated the proper approach to the Scriptures that would come to define the hermeneutical approach of the Old Norwegian Synod. Three documents in particular lay out the spirit and the principles of the Norwegian hermeneutical approach to Scripture: Koren's *En Redegjoerelse* (An Accounting to the congregations of the Norwegian Synod); Koren's 1881 essay *Can and Ought a Christian be Certain of His Salvation*; and *What the Norwegian Synod Has Always Wanted* (1890).

### III. The Norwegian Hermeneutic defined

What is interesting about the above treatises by Koren is that each of them begins with some sort of extended address about proper hermeneutics. For instance, Koren writes in his introduction to *En Redegjoeresle*,

We do not accept as our own a single doctrine which is not clearly based on God's Word and which cannot be shown in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. We owe our congregations an accounting for what we teach and confess; and although we dare to believe that our hearers both know our testimony and will judge it by what they hear of us and not by what others say, we have still considered it our duty to present to you now this our common complete accounting, in which we hope no essential question that concerns the disputed doctrines has been unanswered. We present this accounting to you, then, in the name of the Lord, for testing by the Word of God.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly Koren comments in *Can and Ought a Christian be Certain of His Salvation*,

Men want to build on their own acceptance of the Word in addition to God's Word. They want to make their faith or their willingness to believe, of their own non-resistance, a basis for this confidence...but surely, thereby, faith has

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congregation. Only one standing firmly on the revealed Word of God could have sustained such an experience and made the comments recorded above.

<sup>43</sup> Ylvisaker, *Grace for Grace*, 173-174.

been mortally wounded. For whoever wants to build on something of his own in addition to the promise of God, does not have a true Christian faith which the Holy Ghost works. Because it is the essence and nature of faith to tolerate nothing alongside it in which man might trust except the Word of God alone, or the divine promise.<sup>44</sup>

Koren is even clearer about a proper hermeneutical approach in *What the Norwegian Synod Has Always Wanted*. Koren marks two proper principles in scriptural interpretation which Scripture itself gives: first, Holy Scripture is the only sure and perfect rule of our faith and life; secondly, the great truth that Jesus Christ is the way to salvation for all believing souls.<sup>45</sup> If there is any interpretation of Scripture that does violence to either of these principles so clearly laid out in Scripture, the reader is allowing something other than the Holy Spirit to guide him in his interpretation, be it reason or tradition. Yet, Koren is quick to point out, these principles are not to be taken for granted or handled with arrogance,

It is of no use to put them down on paper as a heading and still act, write, and confess contrary to them. It is of no use to pretend that these two fundamental principles are so well known and so self-evident that we do not need to dwell on them any further. The one who does this shows thereby that he has not even begun to understand and appreciate them.<sup>46</sup>

The two easiest ways in which these principles are abused show themselves is 1) a misuse of God's gift of reason; 2) supplanting the authority of the Scriptures with the opinions of men ("father's theology"). Misapplied reason, Koren remarks, is shown most often when one takes issue with God and presumes to pass judgment on his Word.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> U.V. Koren, "Can and Ought a Christian be Certain of His Salvation?" *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 42, nos. 2, 3 (June/September 2002), 163.

<sup>45</sup> U.V. Koren, "What the Norwegians Synod Has Always Wanted." *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (September 1992), 13.

<sup>46</sup> Koren, *What the Norwegians Synod Has Always Wanted*, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Koren, *What the Norwegian Synod Has Always Wanted*, 21.

The Election Controversy was really a fight over the proper use of reason in the interpretation of Scripture. Schmidt's bold assertion that he had harmonized two seemingly contradictory passages had come at the cost of *sola gratia*. Therefore, Schmidt, with his *intuitu fidei*, had violated both principles of proper biblical interpretation. In the notes to his 1881 essay, Koren writes,

What is important is that we do not make our reason governess of the Word of God, and we do not reject a doctrine which is plainly taught in the Word of God because we cannot make rhyme or reason out of it. We know that the Word of God does not contradict itself, even if we cannot see the agreement.<sup>48</sup>

But does not holding to two clearly revealed doctrines that seem to contradict each other cause a problem? In Koren's view, this is not at all a problem. Scripture is clear. The problem is not the clarity of the revealed doctrines, but our sinful self which keeps us from understanding them fully this side of eternity. That is why Koren especially calls forth the interpreter to pray to God for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.<sup>49</sup> It is a fool's errand for sinful man to attempt to resolve what he perceives to be two mutually exclusive doctrines revealed in God's Holy Word,

Finally we must be convinced that certainty of salvation cannot be obtained by brooding over or wanting to "investigate the secret, concealed abyss of divine predestination." Whoever makes this his beginning will fall either into arrogance or despair and will not attain to any certainty of salvation...for we must carefully distinguish between what God has revealed in His Word and what he has not revealed.

God has in Christ revealed to us all that we need in order to be certain of our salvation, but much of His secret counsel He has kept hidden. We are not to brood over this- and this admonition is needful in the highest degree. In our

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<sup>48</sup> Koren, *Can and Ought...*, 185-186.

<sup>49</sup> Koren, *What the Norwegian Synod Has Always Wanted*, 24.

presumption we take much greater delight in concerning ourselves with matters which we cannot harmonize – in fact we have no command to do so – than with those aspects of the question which God has revealed in His Word.<sup>50</sup>

With the persistent encroachment of rationalism in the Lutheran Church at large and even among the Norwegians, Koren kept sounding the warning against the magisterial use of reason in the interpretation of Scripture,

This is what the Norwegian Synod has contended for, and still contends for: Unwavering obedience to that “which is written” and a frank confession in accordance with it ... He who really believes, i.e. is convinced that the Bible is the Word of God according to which we are to be judged, cannot want to take issue with God and presume to pass judgment on His Word, to accept some and to reject some of it. He will not allow his own thought or reason, or “considered opinion,” or “conscience” or the thoughts, learning, or “scientific knowledge” of other men to sit in judgment on the Word of God and accept some and reject some of it.<sup>51</sup>

But rationalism can get into an otherwise orthodox church through the back door of “father’s theology.” This too, Koren addresses. These three treatises show how the Norwegian Synod used and viewed the Lutheran symbols and the writings of the church fathers. *En Redegjoeresle* casts the Lutheran symbols as precious landmarks because they are drawn from and point directly back to Scripture’s clear teaching. Yet, they are never, never to be placed on the same plain as the Scriptures themselves. The study of the confessions and the fathers, while important, is to never supplant or surpass the direct study of Scripture itself,

In the preceding, I have spoken about our Synod’s position with regard to the Lutheran Scriptural principle...from this it follows that we do not recognize “reason” as a source,

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<sup>50</sup> Koren, *Can and Ought...*, 152-153.

<sup>51</sup> George Lillegard, *Faith of Our Fathers* (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1953), 54-56



rule or judge in matters of faith, neither “the Church”, nor any individual teacher in the church, nor any pastoral conference, nor any congregation, nor any synod, nor any majority, but only “that which is written.”<sup>52</sup>

While Koren does not directly address “father’s theology” in *En Redegjoeresle*, he demonstrates ably the pitfalls of it. If someone (like Schmidt, for example) uses the doctrinal writings of men without first studying the Scripture from which they are drawn and the Lutheran symbols which give testimony to the pure doctrine, then those writings can be easily misinterpreted and used to support a position the orthodox fathers never intended. This was clearly the case with F.A. Schmidt’s use of both Erik Pontoppidan<sup>53</sup> and Johann Gerhard<sup>54</sup> to support a doctrine which both these fathers would have objected to vehemently,

...we acknowledge, not indeed as a complete definition of the concept of election, but still as a correct presentation of the last part of it, the answer given to Q.548 of Pontoppidan’s *Sanhed til Gudfrygtighed*, which reads: “That God has appointed all those to eternal life whom he from eternity has seen would accept the grace proffered them, believe in Jesus and preserve in this faith unto the end. Rom. 8:28-30.” II Tim. 1:13.

This is to be understood in the manner in which it is developed by John Gerhard in the following quotation:

“The merit of Christ is the cause of our election. But since the merit of Christ does not benefit anyone without faith, therefore we say that the regard to faith (*intuitu fidei*) is a

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<sup>52</sup> Koren, *What the Norwegian Synod Has Always Wanted*, 27.

<sup>53</sup> Erik Pontoppidan (1698-1764), Norwegian Lutheran pastor and professor who wrote a popular explanation of Luther’s Catechism for use in school and confirmation instruction entitled *Sanhed til gudfrygtighed* (“Truth unto Piety”). In his explanation of election, Pontoppidan uses the phrase “in view of faith.” This long used phrase became improperly employed during the Election Controversy and was used falsely by Schmidt and other in the Norwegian Synod as a rallying point against the orthodox Lutheran position.

<sup>54</sup> Johann Gerhard (1582-1637), German Lutheran theologian was the first to use the term *intuitu fidei* in connection to the doctrine of election. Gerhard employed the term in a way in which it could be properly understood, but later generations would take his meaning out of context and use it to support the heterodox position during the Election Controversy.

component part of the decree of election. We confess with a loud voice that we teach: that God has not found anything good in the man who was to be chosen to life eternal; that He has not taken into consideration either good works, or the use of free will, or, what is more, *not even faith itself in such a way that he was influenced by it, or that He elected some on account of it...* (Emphasis mine)<sup>55</sup>

Erling Teigen concurs,

...a deeper study of the biblical texts and Article XI of the Formula of Concord on election led to a sharper, more precise expression. For the Norwegians, that re-study led them to the point where they had to reject at least that page in Pontoppidan's Catechism in which they had relied on their orthodoxy. In that sense, they did not have a "Father theology."<sup>56</sup>

A further demonstration that the Norwegian men were not slavishly tied to the expressions of the orthodox Lutheran fathers is found in a short treatise written by Koren concerning the concept of "mechanical inspiration." In this article, one finds that Koren is not only mindful of what the fathers have written, but also critical when he compares it to the clear revelation of Scripture,

Nothing has been revealed to us concerning the manner on which the fact of inspiration is realized. The various errors in this matter stem from the desire of many otherwise pious teachers who have had to explain how the Holy Spirit carried out this work. But we cannot understand that-anymore than we can understand the two natures in the Savior's one person – or even the union of the soul and body in our own person...

The mechanical explanation has, so far as I know, never been used to any extent by teachers of the Lutheran Church, although there are in some of them *expressions* which **we cannot approve** (e.g. Quenstedt in his Dogmatics).<sup>57</sup> (Emphasis mine)

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<sup>55</sup> Ylvisaker, *Grace for Grace*, 183,184.

<sup>56</sup> Erling Teigen, *The Legacy...*, 115.

<sup>57</sup> U.V. Koren, "Mechanical Inspiration." Translated by G. O. Lillegard.

<http://www.blts.edu/essays/korenUV/Mechanical%20Inspiration.pdf>. (Accessed on July 21, 2008).

The Norwegian Synod lived its motto “Gegraptai.” They respected the fathers, but also were critical of them. They zealously cherished the Lutheran symbols, not as a substitute for Scripture, but as weapons forged from Scripture that unmasked the enemies without and within the Lutheran Church. Yet, it was always to the Scriptures they went whenever a doctrinal battle was raging. And yet, in 1917, a mere seven years after the death of Koren, the vast majority of the Synod entered into the un-Scriptural Madison Settlement. What happened?

#### IV. The Norwegian Hermeneutic in the re-organized Norwegian Synod (1917-1955)

The story of the Madison Settlement and the demise of the old Norwegian Synod has been told ably by the ELS historians Theodore Aaberg (*A City Set on a Hill*) and S.C. Ylvisaker (*Grace for Grace*) and need not be recounted fully.<sup>58</sup> What is of interest is how the Norwegian Hermeneutic was it recovered and re-affirmed in the reorganized Norwegian Synod (ELS). One of the original ELS pastors, Christian Anderson, wrote a telling critique as to what he saw as the factors that led to the demise of the Norwegian Synod,

...it is true that in the controversy of the eighties Dr. Koren exposed clearly the errors of the anti-Missourian...But after the complete break in 1887, the majority of our people had tired of the controversy...and neglected to continue to study the issues involved. Thus they became more and

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<sup>58</sup> There is a large amount of evidence that makes it clear the Norwegian Synod would not have gone along with the merger had it not been for the ecclesiastical chicaneries of men like H.G. Stub and Rasmus Malmin. The omission of key statements by orthodox Norwegian leaders to the assembly of the Norwegian Synod, the lack of antitheses in the formulation of the Madison Settlement, cooperation in externals and a rising tide of Norwegian nationalism at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century all led to give the impression to the rank and file pastor and parishioner of the Norwegian Synod that the key issues that had separated the Norwegians, the teaching regarding election and conversion, had indeed been resolved. However, it was nothing but smoke and mirrors, and in the end, the theology of glory won out over the theology of the cross.

more ignorant of the issues, while the opposition by continuing their propaganda against our Synod kept the issues for which they had contended fresh in mind.

I feel that there was something lacking in the instruction of the issues of the controversies at our seminary. This was the case at least when I was a student there. There was too much taken for granted as to our knowledge of these things when they were occasionally mentioned...

This ignorance together with the fact that our Synod, contrary to Titus 3:10 and other passages, continued to negotiate with the opponents long after they had plainly shown that they would not listen to our testimony to the truth, was no doubt the main causes of the deterioration and breakdown of the old Synod.<sup>59</sup>

August Pieper's assessment of the Madison Settlement, given 40 years earlier in the introduction to volume 10 of the *Quartalschrift*, is remarkably similar to Anderson. Pieper asserts that the Madison Settlement is but the fruit of a synod that no longer stood directly on rock of Scripture, but instead upon the malleable opinions of the fathers,

It did not help when we emphatically declared to the Norwegian delegates that the *intuitu fidei* in the doctrine of election is not only a *αγραφον*, but a *αντιγραφον* and that points 1-3 of the "Opgjor" are a denial of Scripture. Their only argument was and remained: Gerhard, Skrivner and above all the Norwegian theologian Pontoppidan, have *intuitu fidei*; you yourselves formerly had it; Walther and you yourselves have not accused someone of heresy who used it the way Gerhard did; we Norwegians have not regarded it as heretical, even though we ourselves use the first doctrinal form and will continue to use it....

With great sorrow have we observed the proceedings in the Norwegian Synod. We have warned in private, debated in part, and requested faculty conferences; we have, when the faculty conferences were rejected, sounded the warning publicly. It was to no avail. Why not? The dear Norwegians

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<sup>59</sup> Christian Anderson, "The Underlying Causes of the Deterioration and Breakdown of the Old Norwegian Synod" *Clergy Bulletin* 13, no. 1 (September of 1953), 4-5.

are sitting, like ourselves, theoretically on Scripture, but practically, as we no longer do, squarely on the fathers.<sup>60</sup>

In short, the very things that made the Norwegian Hermeneutic the vital force in the confessional Lutheran struggles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century - a pious devotional study of Scripture and a zealous defense of the truth in the face of error - were set aside. When one examines the Madison Settlement one is amazed that the successors of Koren, Preus, and Ottesen could be so far from the spirit of their predecessors, men who had zealously defended even minor points of doctrine with Spirit-given tenacity. Even Koren, in his final years, was troubled by this trend among the newer generation of pastors, teachers and young people. In a 1904 address speech at Luther College, Koren warns the young people assembled,

All too often the Christian faith is conceived as being a theory, a doctrinal system which, if one accepts it as being correct, then he is a Christian, a believer. The true Christian faith is not just something that one memorizes. It is not a theory. It is the most practical thing in the world. It is in itself a practice and where it is present there it moves a person in a definite direction – namely, to God. It rules a person and, as the Word of God says, it is active in love...

Now it is unfortunately true that counterfeit faith is very common an external acceptance without the heart...Such faith accomplishes nothing...It is the Word that we must cling to...

At this point I am thinking of the great neglect among our Norwegian people, namely, their infrequent use of the Word of God...God's Word alone can teach us the difference between the true and the false confession of faith.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly he warns the Synod in his last presidential address in 1909,

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<sup>60</sup> August Pieper, "Forward to Volume 10 of the *Quartalschrift*" in *The Wauwatosa Theology: Volume I* Editor Curtis Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 113-114.

<sup>61</sup> U.V. Koren, "Speech at Luther College May 1 1904," Translation by C.M Gullerud. *Journal of Theology* 31, no.1 (March 1991), 2.

But when the essence of faith is changed and weakened, so that there remains merely an indifferent assent to the Word, without personal appropriation of what God has said and promised, then the kernel of faith is gone and only the shell remains. This kind of faith, dead faith, is never troubled by temptations and trials. Those who have it will not experience any spiritual conflicts and affliction because of their faith. But conflict always accompanies faith when it is genuine and real.<sup>62</sup>

The fall of the Norwegian Synod to liberalism and unionism was the result of a great deal of indifference to the Word of God. Even after it became clear to many that the Madison Settlement had in effect denied true Scriptural doctrine and the new course that had been set by its proponents was away from true Lutheran doctrine and practice, few left. S.C. Ylvisaker laments,

Even many who were in sympathy with the stand they had taken toward the Union (the protesting pastors who left to form the ELS) deplored the fact that they wanted to undertake the hopeless task of trying, with so few and humble workers and such small resources, to build again on the ruins of the old synod.<sup>63</sup>

But spiritual steel is forged in the fire of trial. In the lobby of a St. Paul Hotel, a faithful remnant was struggling with their conscience as well as the clear Word of God. And in this small meeting, the smoldering coals of the Norwegian Hermeneutic were fanned back into flame. One year later at the 1<sup>st</sup> convention of the reorganized Synod in Lake Mills, IA, Bjug Harstad, called all those gathered to return alone to the Scriptures for guidance,

This must call forth strange thoughts and questions. Why do we meet alone? Why not together with so many near and dear ones who wish to believe and be saved, as well as

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<sup>62</sup> Koren, *On Using God's Word*, 2.

<sup>63</sup> Ylvisaker, *Grace for Grace*, 117.

we do? Why stand aloof against a current and rush for that great union which all the world is praising? These and similar questions we must earnestly consider, until we, by the power and light of God's Word, arrive at such a firm conviction, that we can, from the Scriptures, answer them properly every time the old Adam puts them in our mind.<sup>64</sup>

The faith which the founders of our old organization these many years fearlessly professed, in speech and writing, and manifested in their church order, is given us by God. It was all prepared according to the Apostolic teaching of the Guide, the Holy Ghost, and all through bears the stamp of evangelical liberty, the truth and grace of God. We have a Christian right to retain it and cannot yield to false brethren, in order that the Gospel may continue with us. (Galatians 2:5) Most of the sages, by whose hand God gave it to us, have finished their course with honor, leaving their shields untarnished, We may be proud of them.<sup>65</sup>

Let us abide strictly in the Word until our dying day.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, President George Gullixson, in a 1923 address to the ELS concurs that the attention to Scripture and what it says is the sole authority,

In this holding fast to the biblical truth lies our hope of success in our work as congregations and as a church body. Let us remember that just this position, on God's Word alone, gave Luther success as the one great reformer of the church. The 'little speck' he stood on was the Word of God. For that reason he was also unassailable, invincible from all the powers which sought to overthrow him. May God give us wisdom and courage not to let ourselves be tempted by the many accusations of "Pharisaism" and "self-importance" which are rampant. People are asking how these few people can be right and the vast majority wrong.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Bjug Harstad, "Opening Sermon on Genesis 12:1-4" *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 42, nos. 2 & 3 (June/September 2002), 191.

<sup>65</sup> Bjug Harstad, Opening Sermon, 192.

<sup>66</sup> Bjug Harstad, Opening Sermon, 199.

<sup>67</sup> George Gullixson, Presidential address given to the 5<sup>th</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, June 15-21, Princeton, MN. <http://www.evangelicallutheransynod.org/publications/essays/presaddresses/1923>. (Accessed July 19, 2008).

The faithful pastors of the Norwegian Synod turned to Scripture for guidance. They knew all too well to avoid the path of glory that glossed over doctrinal aberrations for the sake of earthly peace. Bjug Harstad comments,

Let us humble ourselves under the chastisement of God which allowed our old house to be swept off, and us to remain standing on a bare hill. We know that we had deserved the chastisement because we did not treasure the Lord's Word...

We must rid ourselves of these marks (*referring to the false Christianity of the state church and the merger church*). Since the opposing parties merged, the Synod is tempted to be in competition with them in size and strength. I wonder whether the Lord has now been able to cure us of this illness. In any case, we ought all, pastors and congregations, know that we are called not to be great and powerful before the world but only to everyone knowing for himself the power of grace to save souls. Then we must work against mass- and false-Christianity in our congregations.<sup>68</sup> (Italicized words of explanation mine)

The newly reorganized Synod heeded this call. The Norwegian hermeneutical approach to Scripture that was practiced by Johnson, Caspari, Koren, Preus and Ottesen was revived and instilled in the very marrow of the reorganized Norwegian Synod's pastors and also her parishioners. Stephen Nygaard, a parishioner from Hartland, MN made a telling remark to a neighbor who had referred to the reorganized Norwegian Synod as a plucked chicken, "Yes, that is true, but if she is healthy, she will soon grow her feathers again!"<sup>69</sup>

Proper Scriptural interpretation and application dominated the convention essays of the early years of the ELS. This was due to two major factors. The ELS recognized

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<sup>68</sup> Bjug Harstad, Presidential address given to the 3<sup>rd</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, August 4-10, 1921, Albert Lea, MN. <http://www.evangelicallutheransynod.org/publications/essays/presaddresses/1921>. (Accessed July 19, 2008).

<sup>69</sup> Aaberg, *City Set on a Hill*, 129.



that poor, unscriptural hermeneutics that misused reason and tradition were the culprits behind the selling of the Madison Settlement. Secondly, during a time when there was no seminary, college, or synodical machinery of which to speak, the convention essays were the chief means of uniting the pastors and parishioners of the newly re-organized Synod together in a common confession based solely upon God's Word. They are solid evidence of the conscious desire among the ELS pastors, teachers and parishioners to properly expound and apply the Holy Scriptures. The following list of conference essays shows just how much proper Scriptural hermeneutics were upon the minds of the ELS pastors, teachers and laymen during their first decades of existence:

- 1919 – The Scriptural Principle – M.K. Bleken
- 1922 – The Bible and Evolution – J.E. Thoen
- 1924 – The Power of the Word of God – Christian Andersen
- 1933 - The Literal and Figurative Language in Scripture – E. Ylvisaker
- 1936 – Our Heritage and Our Responsibility – J.A. Moldstad
- 1938 – The Clearness of Scripture – S.C. Ylvisaker
- 1940 – The Question of Non-fundamentals in the Light of Scripture – S.C. Ylvisaker
- 1942 – The Scripture Cannot Be Broken – Torald Teigen; The Importance of the Doctrine of Verbal Inspiration of the Bible- C.M Gullerud
- 1943- Sola Scriptura- J.A. Petersen
- 1952 – Ask for the Old Paths – Christian Anderson.

The first principle of biblical interpretation, that the Word of God alone is the sole source and norm of theology, and because of that it is also the only sure and perfect rule for faith and life, is clearly elucidated. Torald Teigen makes this point abundantly clear in his 1942 conference essay *The Scripture Cannot Be Broken*,

The inspiration of Scripture is what makes the Scriptures the Word of God. And since Scripture is God's Word from beginning to end, it is of the highest authority to which we can appeal. Because it is in every word the Word of God, it is a Word that cannot make a mistake ...to concede that it is not the inspired Word of God in every word is to make the concession that it might contain error. To make such a

concession is to rob God of the honor that is due him,  
making him a liar.<sup>70</sup>

Similarly, John Moldstad Sr. in his essay *The Sacredness of the Ancient Landmarks*,  
remarks,

...the Bible is eternal, unchangeable, without any error,  
sure, perfect and complete. We need no additional  
revelation, there never has been any other and there never  
will be. It is the **only** sure perfect rule and infallible rule of  
faith and life, perfect, clear and plain in all that is necessary  
to know in order to be saved.

Scripture explains itself, has absolute authority in  
whatsoever it teaches and records, not only in doctrine, but  
also in all other things such as history, nature, science etc.  
The Holy Ghost is always present in Scripture and works  
through it. He makes no mistakes...The gospel is the pearl  
of great price, the source of grace and blessing and comfort  
in death as well as life.<sup>71</sup> (Emphasis mine)

The Lutheran principle *Sola Scriptura* is upheld again and again in these essays.  
But it is also noted that this principle is no dead letter, no empty word. For not only do  
these early conventions essays uphold the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, but also the proper  
application of it by pastor, teacher, and layman alike. The essayists recognize that for a  
pastor or a parishioner to truly guard *Sola Scriptura*, they must not to treat it like an  
historical antiquity of the Reformation, but to actively apply it both publicly and privately  
in the life of the church. M.K. Bleken comments,

But now someone could be perhaps inclined to think: “Yes,  
that is quite correct, God’s Word ought to be explained  
correctly; but what does that have to do with us. We are not  
preachers and expositors of Scripture. That has to do with  
those who administer the office of the Word in the

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<sup>70</sup> Torald Teigen, “The Scriptures Cannot Be Broken” (paper presented at the 25<sup>th</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, June 11-17, 1942, Northwood, IA.), 23.

<sup>71</sup> John Moldstad, “The Sacredness of the Ancient Landmarks”(paper presented at the 27<sup>th</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, June 9-14, 1944, Koshkonong, WI.), 19.

congregation, not us listeners.” Certainly it has to do with those who expound God’s Word publicly in a congregation, those who instruct the Word...But it is a great and fatal mistake to think that it **only** has to do with them. No, it likewise has much to do with those who are instructed in the Word, all who want to be Christians.<sup>72</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Bleken goes on to say that there are three forces that are always trying to corrupt the proper application of *Sola Scriptura* in the life of the church: rationalism, mysticism, and tradition, all of which erode the authority of the clear, simple words of the divinely inspired Scripture.<sup>73</sup> These three dangers are expounded upon further by later essayists. In his 1943 convention essay *Sola Scriptura*, Justin Peterson expounds on the danger of the misapplying reason in biblical hermeneutics,

Reason has its place and use in the study of God’s Word. We need our reason to understand the meaning of the words used in Scripture. We must observe the fixed laws of language. And we must be able to think logically...Reason makes a good *servant* of theology, but a very poor *master*.

When human reason would sit in judgment upon God’s Word, it is setting itself up as God, placing itself above God. Luther uses harsh language, but not too harsh, in describing this brazen effrontery of human reason. He calls reason “Satan’s paramour,” and the “enemy of faith.”<sup>74</sup>

Similarly, S.C. Ylvisaker also warns against misapplying reason in biblical hermeneutics in his 1938 conventions essay, “The Clearness of Scripture,” when he comments,

Reason is not there to make Scripture clear, as if it were unclear. Reason is not there to play master, as if the Word of God can be made a servant to the whims and fancies of reasons. Reason is not there to test Scripture in order to determine whether it speaks logically and reasonably or not; or to strain the words of Scripture as a prospector

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<sup>72</sup> M.K. Bleken, “The Scriptural Principle” (paper presented to the 2<sup>nd</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, Albert Lea, MN, May 29-June 4, 1919.), 5. Translation by Rev. Mark DeGarmeaux.

<sup>73</sup> Bleken, *The Scriptural Principle*, 11.

<sup>74</sup> Justin Petersen, “Sola Scriptura” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 42, nos. 2&3 (June/September 2002), 235.

strains gold bearing sand in order to discover what nugget of truth may be there. It is not there to make Scripture say what it does not say, or to make it deny what it does say. It is not there to grasp what the Scriptures say, as if Scripture is a thing which must speak only that which may be fathomed by the mind of man and cannot go beyond the limits of that mind.

Reason has its place, but it is a very limited place after all. It is there to serve as the eye to read the words, thus: “In due time Christ died for the ungodly”... It is there to serve as the ear to hear, thus: “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”... It is there as the memory to call to mind and remind, as in the case of the prodigal son... It is there to study the laws of language, so that we may clearly distinguish between expressions... or to study the laws of other languages, so that we may translate from one language correctly into another.<sup>75</sup>

But there also is a warning against using tradition as the master interpreter rather than letting the Scriptures interpret themselves. The early ELS fathers had just as great a warning against *Vatertheologie* as did their German brethren in Wauwatosa. Bleken makes the following strong statement against appealing to the tradition rather than the Scriptures themselves,

It is naturally much easier to take it easy with this person or that person having said such and such, and being someone who worships authority; but if one is to have a firmly grounded conviction, then it must be built upon God’s Word. And one cannot come to such a conviction without himself having searched the Scripture and knowing what it says. Only then can one say: “I believe this because it is written thus.”...

...it is a convenient excuse for those who are so spiritually sluggish and foolish that they do not bother to investigate whether these things are so, but simply go along where it is easiest and most comfortable and let others think and

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<sup>75</sup> S. C. Ylvisaker, “The Clearness of the Scriptures” (paper presented to the 21<sup>st</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, Mankato, MN, June 10-15, 1938.), 21.

believe for them, such as is the case in the Catholic Church.<sup>76</sup>

Even the valued Lutheran Confessions, as valuable as they were, were never to be considered a source of doctrine alongside of Scripture.<sup>77</sup> The Norwegians revered the Lutheran Confessions as a true touchstone of orthodoxy. They honored greatly the writings of the Lutheran Church fathers. Yet, both these revered writings and the Lutheran symbols were strictly kept in their proper place. President Henry Ingebritson of the ELS writes in his 1940 presidential address,

...let us ever be mindful of the fact that our Lutheran Confessions are at best only a second line of defense. More than ever, we need to hearken to the exhortations of the Holy Spirit through the INSPIRED WORD OF GOD. Devotional literature and confessions of the church must not and cannot replace the inspired Word.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, no “new” revelations can be used to obscure Scripture. First, Peterson states, we are neither promised them nor are we to expect them. Rather we are time and time again directed “to the Word of the apostles and the prophets.”<sup>79</sup>

Perhaps the best summation of the Norwegian Hermeneutic is found in the final sermon preached by Norman Madson, long time ELS pastor and the first Dean of the Bethany Lutheran Seminary, which had the fitting title *Sola Scriptura*. The sermon’s parts were: I. The Bible is absolutely reliable; II. The Bible is clear; III. The Bible gives us the only saving message we have.<sup>80</sup> Madson’s sermon was based upon II Peter 1:19-21, and in discussing the text Madson makes this comment,

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<sup>76</sup> Bleken, *The Scriptural Principle*, 3-4.

<sup>77</sup> Bleken, *The Scriptural Principle*, 11.

<sup>78</sup> H. Ingebritson, Presidential address given to the 23<sup>rd</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN, June 13-19, 1940.

<sup>79</sup> Petersen, *Sola Scriptura*, 238.

<sup>80</sup> Norman Madson, “Sola Scriptura: The Final Sermon Preached by Norman Madson.” In *Morning Bells at Our Savior’s*” edited by Paul Madson (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 2008), 402.

Now we know how tempting it is for human nature to wax eloquently upon some subject where the person in question has enjoyed a special privilege. You are familiar with preachers who go abroad every so often, in order that they may have something to preach about – their experiences. Now Peter was human. We might expect therefore that when he mentions this unusual experience on the mount, he would go into greater detail about what happened there. But lo and behold, he has no more than mentioned it, when he immediately forgets himself in remembrance of something far more important, the everlasting Word. . . . It was as though he would say, “Forget Peter for the time being, and get back to your Bibles.”

To Peter the Holy Scriptures had become an inexhaustible storehouse of everlasting truth, from whence he could draw all which was necessary during his earthy sojourn. There he found the Law in all its crushing conviction, showing him how desperately he was in need of a Redeemer if he were not to perish in the midst of many heinous sins. But there he would also find the Gospel, a comfort for every sorrow and a balm for every wound, life itself in the very midst of death.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Norman Madson, *Morning Bells*, 402-403.

## Chapter 2

### The Wauwatosa Theology

The hermeneutical method that would eventually define the Wisconsin Synod was forged in a different crucible. The Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan Synods could not be classified as strictly confessional Lutheran at the time of their founding. While these synods identified themselves as Lutherans, they all had ties to milder Lutheranism in this country and abroad. Such ties exposed these synods to sharp, at times harsh, criticisms by the Missouri Synod. Yet it was not the harshness of Missouri's criticism that changed the theological course of these synods, but a solid patient study of Scriptures and the Lutheran symbols.

The turn to a scripturally sound theology was one that gradually came with new, confessionally minded men to the Wisconsin Synod (Bading, Koehler, and Hoenecke), the Minnesota Synod (Sieker, Albrecht) and the Michigan Synod (Eberhardt, Klingmann). The sound Scriptural principles of these newly confessional synods were put to the test in various ways: the controversy over the Four Points in the General Council; the severance of ties with the unionistic mission societies of Germany; and the Election Controversy. By the time the dust had settled from these battles, the three founding synods of the WELS stood clearly on the principle *Sola Scriptura* with their brethren in the Synodical Conference.

The second generation of Wisconsin Synod theologians, however, saw dark clouds on the horizon in the Synodical Conference when it came to the practice of biblical hermeneutics. Sloppy exegesis and the elevation of the words and opinions of the church fathers caused Wisconsin Synod theologians to dig deeper into Scripture. The

hermeneutical approach to Scripture, later termed the Wauwatosa Theology developed as a reaction to this attitude. For almost four generations, the Wauwatosa men (John Schaller, August Pieper, J.P. Koehler and later John P. Meyer) would instill this hermeneutical method in the pastors of the WELS.

This hermeneutical approach kept (and has continued to keep) the Wisconsin Synod from theological stagnation by keeping her pastors and people constantly going directly to the rejuvenating water of life that springs from the Holy Scriptures. More than this, the Wauwatosa hermeneutical method made the Wisconsin Synod ready for theological battles in that would eventually lead to the demise of the Synodical Conference.

### I. Foundations of the Wauwatosa Method: Stoeckhardt and Hoenecke

Contrary to popular perception, the Wauwatosa method was not created by theological triumvirate of J.P. Koehler, August Pieper, and John Schaller in a classroom on the corner of 60<sup>th</sup> and Lloyd,<sup>82</sup> but it was built upon an approach to Scripture that had already been instilled in them by pastors and professors of a previous generation. The two men that were most influential in laying the groundwork for the approach to Scripture known as the “Wauwatosa Theology” were Wisconsin Synod Professor Adolph Hoenecke and the Missouri Synod’s chief exegete George Stoeckhardt.

Hoenecke’s hermeneutical approach to Scripture was developed by long hours of study in the most contrasting of situations: the busy University of Halle and the solitude of the Swiss Alps; the relative quiet of a small parish in Farmington, WI and the boisterous doctrinal battles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And yet out of this varied experience,

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<sup>82</sup> The location of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary prior to its move to Mequon in 1929.



Hoenecke developed and passed on to his students a very clear and concise approach to Scripture.

First, true theology is taught solely by the Holy Spirit and solely through the study of the divine Word. Hoenecke lamented the trend among liberal theologians to treat dogmatics as a science or academic discipline rather than a devotional meditation upon the inspired Word of God.<sup>83</sup> Hoenecke saw the true role of dogmatics was to search the Scriptures.<sup>84</sup> Pieper comments,

...he spoke German, and sought to lead his students in their mother tongue to understand the content and method of our dogmatics. In doing so, he was in principle and practice a more Scriptural theologian than Walther. The orthodox dogmaticians were not authorities for him to the same extent as they were for Walther. He tested them more critically. He sought to lead his students directly into Scripture and to base everything on Scripture.<sup>85</sup>

Hoenecke maintained that using the Scriptures as the sole source of doctrine was not a matter of choice, but that faith obliged you to use them as God has commanded.<sup>86</sup>

Second, the interpretation of the Scriptures was not dependant on the traditions and opinions of previous generations. Koehler notes that Hoenecke was more critical of the orthodox fathers, appreciating their work but not adopting their system or method, feeling free to depart from it if need called for it.<sup>87</sup> Even Hoenecke himself freely

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<sup>83</sup> Martin Westerhaus, "Adolph Hoenecke and the *Quartalschrift*." Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary On-Line Essay File, 3. <http://www.wlssays.net/authors/W/WesterhausHoenecke/WesterhausHoenecke.PDF>. (Accessed July 21, 2008), 3.

<sup>84</sup> John Philip Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (Sauk Rapids: Sentinel Publishing Company, 1951), 243.

<sup>85</sup> August Pieper, "Anniversary Reflections" in *Wauwatosa Theology: Volume III* edited by Curtis Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 282-283.

<sup>86</sup> Adolph Hoenecke, "Agreement on the Correct View of the Authority of Scripture as the Source of Doctrine: The Way to Unity in the Church." *Theologische QuartalSchrift 1*, no. 4 (1904), 1. Translation by Martin Westerhaus. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary On-line Essay File. <http://www.wlssays.net/authors/H/HoeneckeAuthority/HoeneckeAuthority.PDF>. (Accessed July 21 2008), 1.

<sup>87</sup> Koehler, *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 215.

criticizes the exegesis of the later orthodox theologians like Abraham Calov and Andreas Quenstedt for letting their dogmatic considerations color their exegesis.<sup>88</sup> The father's writings were useful, but they dare never be used as the key for understanding Scripture, for the father's themselves erred at times.

An example of Hoenecke's critical view of the fathers can be found in his *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics* in the article concerning election. When Hoenecke begins discussing the fathers' distinction between the antecedent and consequential will of God in regards to the doctrine of election, he says, "Here the weak side of the later dogmaticians of our church appears..."<sup>89</sup> Further, he very bluntly rejects the manner in which the term *intuitu fidei* had been misused and misunderstood in Lutheran theology from Gerhard on.<sup>90</sup>

Perhaps even more telling about Hoenecke's critical attitude toward the fathers is a comment made by Walter Hoenecke, his son, in a *Gemeindeblatt* article published after the death of the revered Wisconsin Synod theologian. In discussing his father's theological method, Walter made these observations,

To him, dogmatics was far more than just proof passages. In his dogmatics, he began every paragraph with proof from the Scripture. When he had substantiated his doctrinal theses from Scripture, he then counted that as substantiated conclusively. The dogmaticians didn't make him any more certain. He quotes them extensively, but only in order to show that our Lutheran church of today stands exactly as it did from Luther to the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Martin Westerhaus, *Hoenecke and the Quartalschrift*, 4. Abraham Calov (1612-1686) and Andreas Quenstedt (1617-16188) were both Lutheran theologians known for their extensive work in the field of systematic theology, both authoring widely used devotional, polemic and dogmatic works.

<sup>89</sup> Adolph Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics vol. III* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999), 9.

<sup>90</sup> Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics Vol. III*, 35.

<sup>91</sup> Walter Hoenecke, "Hoenecke in Private Life". Translation by Rev. Chris Doerr, 2.

Third, one dare not limit this authority of Scripture. This is happened when any theologian gave his own reason magisterial authority over the clear words of Scripture. This attitude, Hoenecke recognized, was not only in the rationalists of Europe, but also lurking within American Lutheranism. When addressing those who held *intuitu fidei* concept (Ohio and Iowa Synods), he makes the following point in regard their persistent error in the face of Scripture's clear teaching,

2. Scholarly arrogance. Our opponents have openly declared that it is the duty of theology to harmonize the truths of faith and to bring them into a system. What to be sure in a totally different way dominates German theology is active among our opponents, namely, the fanaticism about systems, which is basically the purest enthusiasm.<sup>92</sup>

Any form of biblical hermeneutics that sat in judgment of clear passages of Scripture, forcing them to fit into the confines of sinful man's reason, was anathema to Hoenecke. Consider his dire rebuttal of the biblical hermeneutics that were gaining sway in the Ohio and Iowa Synods,

God, who wants to rule our spirit, heart, and will by His Scriptures, has, in doing so, not arranged matters in regard to his Scriptures in the manner of many a secular government, that is, that he establishes a lower house and a upper house, the lower house consisting of the large number of proof passages...and the upper house, the *analogia fidei*, in the sense current today, as a small collection of the principle truths of salvation. A theory that makes Scripture a source of doctrine in this way clearly does not originate in Scripture itself. A statement such as follows is entirely the result of an arbitrary decision: "For Christians, especially for theologians, the doctrines of Christianity form a recognizable, organic whole or system, which is taken and compiled from the completely clear passages of Scripture. This organic whole stands as the highest norm for the interpretation of Scripture even above parallelism or the comparison of the Scripture passages

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<sup>92</sup> Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics Vol. III*, 52.

which treat the same doctrine. In other words, it forms the analogy of faith.”

This is...the purest instance of putting the cart before the horse. Christian doctrines, if they are to form a whole, must have been taken from the clear passages, in other words, from the *sedes*...otherwise, how would they form a harmonious whole? By now the whole, the product, is to be above the producer, the *sedes*, and as the *analogia fide* the whole is to be the norm which stands above all. Such a self-contradicting theory clearly bears the mark of originating not in Scripture, but somewhere else.<sup>93</sup>

Hoenecke’s system for interpreting the Scripture was described best in his obituary by Koehler: “*Dass man die Schrift nehme...wie sie lautet,*” that one takes Scripture simply, the way they are read.<sup>94</sup> Even in his final forwards to the *Quartalschrift*, Hoenecke remarks that arguments over what might seem like insignificant wrangling were of extreme importance, for they touched on the how one interprets the Scriptures properly.

Hoenecke closes the last of his forwards to the *Quartalschrift* with the following prayer: “May God grant us strength for this work and help us carry it out in the manner indicated, simply to present the truth from the Scriptures and so contribute to the defeat of error without unspiritual wrangling, without turning to biting sarcasm as the weapon with which best to crush an opponent.”<sup>95</sup> Hoenecke would continue to offer theological guidance until his death in 1908. His principles for proper biblical hermeneutics were summed up with one brief statement: “The ground knowledge in theology is this: *The Lord has said it.*”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Hoenecke, *Agreement...*, 3.

<sup>94</sup> Westerhaus, *Hoenecke and the Quartalschrift*, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

For Hoenecke, the way we let Scripture speak is to gather all the passages that deal with the same doctrine and examine them exegetically. When this detailed examination and understanding of the individual passages has been reached, then, and only then, are they to be assembled into articles of faith. However, Hoenecke made the following warning at the free conferences,

It will appear, again and again, there are such utterances of the Spirit that remain paradoxical to our human reason or that we cannot adequately express. For the doctrine deals with the divine, eternal truths of salvation that on practically every count is beyond our comprehension and human concepts. And in want of the conception, our expression and language is likewise lame, so Scripture itself time and again resorts to figurative and parabolic speech, The dogmatician's business then is not to try to reconcile the Scriptural truths to our human mind and make it plausible; that is the way of rationalism... Faith can grasp what our human mind rejects, which also remains a mystery because of the individual differences of mental and spiritual make-up.<sup>97</sup>

But Hoenecke's dogmatic approach to Scripture was only half a foundation of biblical hermeneutics that would come to define the Wisconsin Synod. The other half of the foundation was laid by George Stoeckhardt, the great Missouri Synod exegete. He would teach the Wauwatosa men the principles of exegetical "sorting" to which Hoenecke alluded.

Stoeckhardt's began teaching exegesis at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in 1878, which also happened to coincide with the beginning of the Election Controversy. Stoeckhardt's fresh exegesis help the Synodical Conference think through the doctrine of election and ultimately debunk the *intuitu fidei* of the Anti-Missourian Brotherhood and

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<sup>97</sup> Koehler, *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, 243.

the Ohio Synod.<sup>98</sup> This method led to, at least in the eyes of Koehler, Pieper and Schaller, a more Scriptural approach to Lutheran theology. Stoeckhardt himself notes that such an approach had the following positive results in the Election Controversy,

Precisely in these days God has pointed us toward Scripture, as with an outstretched finger. The doctrinal strife of the last years has directed us once more to Scripture. We have become aware anew of the proper principle of Lutheran theology, and that is the Scriptural principle. We confront face to face old and new opponents and hold fast: We let the Word remain, as it reads, and we renounce on principle all rational connected rhyme.<sup>99</sup>

But the exegetical task for Stoeckhardt is not something to remain in a glass case, broken only in the case of doctrinal emergency. Rather, Stoeckhardt instilled in his students the importance of diligent, continuous study of the Holy Scripture, especially in the original Greek and Hebrew. “Diligent, continuous meditation brings also *tentatio* (temptation) with it, for the devil in all respects impeding to the Word, and propels one into prayer, and so scriptural study makes proper theology” became Stoeckhardt’s take on Luther’s maxim.<sup>100</sup>

And for Stoeckhardt, like the Wauwatosa theologians, true understanding of Scripture happens only when one takes seriously the simple clear meaning of words, grammar and syntax of the original language. To forego this analysis is to give short shrift to the theological task of the pastor. Forsaking the exegesis of the original biblical texts for the writings of the Lutheran fathers opened the door for misunderstanding at the least and doctrinal aberration at the worst,

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<sup>98</sup> The Anti-Missourian Brotherhood was the name of the group that broke away from the Norwegian Synod over the Election Controversy. This group eventually merged with the Norwegian-Danish Conference and the Norwegian Augustana Synod to form the United Norwegian Lutheran Church in America.

<sup>99</sup> Joel Pless, “George Stoeckhardt: *The Exegetical Task*,” (lecture, 39<sup>th</sup> annual Bethany Reformation Lectures, Mankato, MN, October 26-27 2005), 9.

<sup>100</sup> Pless, *George Stoeckhardt...*, 10.

It may never be forgotten, that the divine thoughts exactly in the Word, which lies written before our eyes, like the sword in the sheath, are contained and concealed. On that account proper study of the Scripture, proper mediation of manifold divine truth, is not possible, without also turning his attention to the individual words, sentences and sentence structure. Whoever is always conscious of it, will respect that the Holy Spirit has taught, placed and arranged the words, will respect the trouble it is worth, to be continuously occupied with vocables lexicon, and grammar. Whoever has not learned to read the Bible in the original text has not sufficient means of help, to investigate the precise literal sense of the Word.<sup>101</sup>

When one combines the exegetical methodology of Stoeckhardt with the proper dogmatic methodology of Hoenecke, one gets the Wauwatosa theology, which is nothing more than the proper application of the Lutheran principle of *Sola Scriptura*.

So why do many treat Wauwatosa methodology as a departure rather than a continuation of these great teachers? The easiest answer is a lack of careful study of the theology and methodology of Hoenecke and Stoeckhardt, as well as its relation to the methodology of the Wauwatosa trio. Another answer is the inflated view of some Protest'ant historians of Koehler's independence of thought and methodology, which otherwise thorough Lutheran scholars (such as Clifford Nelson and Robert Preus) are quick to accept without much question.

What really defines Wauwatosa method is a curriculum shift.<sup>102</sup> No longer would dogmatics be the primary theological discipline. Rather, exegesis and church history must get as due diligence as had been reserved primarily for dogmatics. The Wauwatosa method was really a paradigm shift in educational curriculum that sought to immerse the students in Scripture so that they would not fall into the traps of reason or *Vatertheologie*

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<sup>101</sup> Pless, *Reformation Lectures*, 10

<sup>102</sup> Jahn, *Wauwatosa Theology Vol. I*, 85.

that were already causing disruption among the members of the Synodical Conference in the area of proper biblical hermeneutics.

## II. The Wauwatosa Theology (1904-1929)

Joel Pless defines the Wauwatosa theology in this way,

Between the years 1904-1929, in a suburb of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a unique approach to both the study and the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures was developed. The hermeneutical method has been called the “Wauwatosa theology” or the “Wauwatosa Gospel.” Its originators were three men trained at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. All were students of the American Luther, Dr. C.F.W. Walther. The Wauwatosa Theology received its name from the Milwaukee suburb where a Lutheran seminary was located which trained pastors for what is today known as the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The three seminary professors who originated this approach to the study of Scripture were John P. Koehler, August Pieper, and John Schaller, the “Wauwatosa Triumvirate.”

...Central to Koehler’s approach to Scripture, later shared by both Pieper and Schaller, was the view that the Scriptures should be historically and grammatically interpreted on the basis of the original Hebrew and Greek texts, with no dogmatic or ecclesiastical presuppositions. This method proved to be the heart and core of the Wauwatosa theology.<sup>103</sup>

During the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a series of free conferences were held between Ohio, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, and various other Midwestern church bodies. The main article of disagreement still remained the doctrine of election, which had caused Ohio to break fellowship with the Synodical Conference and caused a civil war among the Norwegians. While the free conferences did not accomplish their goal of

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<sup>103</sup> Joel Pless, “The Doctrine of the Word of God According to the Wauwatosa Theology.” Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary on-line essay file. <http://www.wlssays.net/authors/PQ/PlessWauwatosa/PlessWauwatosa.pdf>. (Accessed July 21, 2008), 1.



bringing unity to the various Lutheran bodies on the basis of God's Word, they did serve as the catalyst for the Wauwatosa Theology.

Two things troubled the Wauwatosa men in the discussions that had occurred. The first was the desire to quote the fathers and their interpretations of passages rather than doing proper exegesis of the Scripture. This was especially notable among the Missourians. August Pieper comments,

Nevertheless, Walther's method, however justified as it may have been in the beginning, was in principle and practice wrong. It did not rest *directly* on Scripture and did not lead one directly into it – something that Luther with all his writing wanted to bring about... This caused people to think that the point that was presented or discussed was sufficiently established by the quotations from Luther and the fathers without a study of Scripture itself. It kept people from studying the Scriptures....

The citation theology, which thus became fashionable in the case of many a student, outdid the master and produced a theology of the fathers which came home with a vengeance in the election controversy.<sup>104</sup>

The second problem, especially evident in the Ohio, Iowa, and the United Church, was a rationalism that tried to harmonize all the articles of faith into a logical package. This problem naturally would occur when a person's faith was not based upon Scripture itself but on what some father had said about Scripture. Schaller notes this danger,

Only in the written Word do we have the truth... What God has uttered in His doctrine is His doctrine, is the truth, and in the very form of the words He has chosen. Faith grasps this presentation of the truth and consequently possesses the truth precisely in this presentation. Therefore they have the truth that cling to the simple, clear word of Scripture as THE doctrine.

It is therefore at least inexact to say divine truth is that which is clearly expressed in Scripture and results from

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<sup>104</sup> Pieper, *Anniversary Reflections*, 263.

incontestable logical conclusions... The theologian who feels called to harmonize Scripture truths finds the motive for this procedure in the incontestable fact that the separate morsels of the truth that God has revealed to us do not always have logical connections... he who yields place to reason, instead of taking it captive under the obedience of Christ, soon feels the incompleteness of his knowledge as a burdensome limitation and seeks to break through the bars, Then he begins to harmonize. He proceeds to chip off, piece by piece, from Scripture truths that do not want to fit together logically, until the corners fit together, until he has a structure that fits together logically.<sup>105</sup>

The Wauwatosa Theology sought to remedy these two ailments of confessional Lutheran hermeneutics, rationalism and traditionalism, by returning to the Scriptures directly. This is not to say that such an approach was new to the Lutheran Church and not even new to the Wisconsin Synod. It had certainly been the goal of the 1<sup>st</sup> generation of Synodical Conference men, notably Walther, Hoenecke and Stoeckhardt. It was certainly the methodology of Luther. Dr. Gottfried Hermann of the Evangelisch Lutherische FreiKirke has made this judgment,

Behind [the Wauwatosa Theology] lay an experience in the election controversy that was now injected into the WELS. At that time, it became evident that the majority of the orthodox fathers erred in this doctrine... Now the Wauwatosa theologians did nothing other than raise this to be the basic principle: Only Scripture can be the “Norma normans.” This was, of course, also clear to Walther, but in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generations of Missouri there was a not-to-be-underestimated danger that they would occupy themselves more with the arguments of the fathers than with the Scriptures.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> John Schaller, “The Possession of Truth” in *The Wauwatosa Theology Volume I*, edited by Curtis Jahn, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 146-147.

<sup>106</sup> Gottfried Herrmann, “The Theological Development of the WELS with Particular Reference to its Doctrine of the Ministry” Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary On-line Essay File. <http://www.wlssays.net/authors/H/HerrmannDevelopment/HerrmannDevelopment.pdf>. (Accessed July 21, 2008). 8.

A fuller analysis of the Wauwatosa Theology and its impact in the Wisconsin Synod has been made by in the three volume series *The Wauwatosa Theology*. For the purposes of this study, it will suffice to say that the methodology of the Wauwatosa men would guard subsequent generations of Wisconsin Synod pastors from rationalistic and repristinatory theology that has since plagued the Missouri Synod.

### III. Comparing and contrasting the Wauwatosa Method with the Norwegian Hermeneutic

How does the Wauwatosa method compare with the Norwegian Hermeneutic? In essentials, they are the same. Both approach the text with the presupposition of faith. Both regard the text as the verbally, plenary inspired Word of God that is the only correct rule and guide for the Christian. Both guard against the magisterial use of reason. Both keep the opinions of the fathers in their proper place. One is also struck by the similarity of their language and expression. Anyone familiar with the writings of the Wauwatosa theologians is immediately struck when reading the ELS hermeneutical essays by how similar fears as well as similar principles are stated with similar language. Even the excerpts cited above show solidarity in their approach to the Church's theological task, given by Christ Jesus, of "teaching everything I have commanded you."

This is not to say each approach is absolutely identical with each other. Yes, they speak the same language, but they speak it with distinctive accents. Whereas the Wauwatosa Theology purposely made a point of breaking with the *Vatertheologie* methodology and expressions, preferring rather contemporary idioms to express timeless truth, the Norwegian Hermeneutic purposely cites of the fathers and keeps their dogmatic terminology to show a firm link between themselves and their honored ancestors.

*The Wauwatosa Accent*

Paul Wendland, current president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, clearly speaks with a Wauwatosa accent when he writes,

When finally we are presented with those terms that are a delight to every seminarian's ear – the *genus idiomaticum*, the *genus maiestaticum*, and the *genus apotelesmaticum* – our perplexity grows deeper. Are such terms necessary? Have the theologians gone mad?

Of course the language sounds strange to us! It was forged in the heat of controversy largely unknown to us and during a time far removed from our own. In order to understand it, we have to have some sense of why believers found it necessary to talk that way in the first place...

...we must understand that it is not enough to act as if we can simply restate what has been said in previous ages. Let's face it: so often when we talk doctrine, our words sound a little musty. We sometimes fail to see that our forbearers, the confessors, were speaking the truth in love to their own times and to the dilemmas people of their own generation faced. The words hammered out were their words. For us to make a complete confession of the same truths, we also need to speak our own words, words drawn from the same clear well of God's eternal Word.<sup>107</sup>

The Wauwatosa accent strives for contemporary clarity. This is due not because of the mistrust of the sainted fathers' words, but rather out of fear that a contemporary student might be tempted to content himself with a superficial familiarity of past dogmatic expression rather than actually struggling with the doctrine itself. Examples of this Wauwatosa accent abound, but one in particular stands out: J.P. Koehler's 1904 article "The Analogy of Faith" in the first volume of the newly inaugurated *Quartalschrift*.

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<sup>107</sup> Paul Wendland, "Now that God is One of Us: A Study of the Communications of Attributes in the Person of Christ." In *We Believe in Jesus Christ: Essays on Christology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000), 67-68.

One of the chief terms used by orthodox Lutheran theologians when discussing hermeneutics is “the analogy of faith.” The traditional understanding of the analogy of faith is that one lets the clear passages of scriptures that speak on the same subject matter, with the same ideas or thoughts, shed light on those passages that are less clear.

Hoenecke defines the analogy in this way, “the total of the revealed doctrines of faith, which are taught in the Scripture itself, and not only the chief truths of salvation.”<sup>108</sup>

The term however has come to mean different things to different people. Schliermacher and Hoffmann used the term to refer to personal faith, thus making my feelings and emotions the ultimate interpreter of the Holy Scriptures rather than the Scriptures themselves. Today, some Lutherans use the term as a shorthand way of saying that we need to read Scripture with the assistance and interpretive help of the church fathers that come before us, such as David Scaer of Concordia Theological Seminary-Fort Wayne, IN.<sup>109</sup>

During the Free Conference Period (1903-1906), the theologians of Ohio and Iowa Synods argued that this analogy referred to an aggregate of Scripture (*das Schriftganze*), which consisted only of the important or fundamental doctrines of Scripture. Therefore, according to Ohio and Iowa, this “aggregate” acted a judge and harmonizer of all the rest of the doctrines of Scripture. This understanding opened the door for the magisterial use of reason in the interpretation of Holy Scripture, making the “harmonizer” the ultimate judge of how a person was to understand a particular doctrine of Scripture.

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<sup>108</sup> Adolph Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics: Volume I*, Translation by James Langbartels and Heinrich Vogel (Milwaukee: NPH, 2009), 496.

<sup>109</sup> John F. Brug, “It’s Not Your Grandfather’s Missouri Synod,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, volume 105, #4 (Fall 2008), 294-295.

The Free Conferences then became less about the particular doctrines of conversion and election that had separated the Ohio and Iowa Synods from the Synodical Conference and more about what was and what was not the proper understanding of the analogy of faith hermeneutical principle. One particular sticking point was the “proof passage” for the analogy of faith hermeneutic supposedly found in Romans 12:6.

What bothered J.P. Koehler is that the entire discussion seemed to neglect a proper exegesis of the assumed *sedes* of the analogy of faith, Romans 12:6. Therefore, in the first volume of the *Quartalschrift*, he deals with this exegetical point. In the final analysis, Koehler stated that there are exegetically no grounds for the translation of Romans 12:6 as “the analogy of faith.” Since such is the case, and since much of the argument has stemmed from a misunderstanding and/or misuse of this term, the term itself should be dropped. Not surprisingly, Koehler’s conclusions were immediately questioned by both those outside and inside the Synodical Conference.<sup>110</sup>

The struggle to make each generation deal directly with the text of Scripture has the natural effect of sounding fresh and independent of past language. As noble as this goal is, it is not without its side-effect. Such a method causes some to wonder what is motivating the change of language and why such a change is needed. Some of the most vociferous critics of August Pieper, J.P. Koehler, and John Schaller were Franz Pieper and many of the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Indeed, when all parties got together to discuss exactly what was said, much of the criticisms disappeared, but that did not settle the feelings among their students that a change in expression must mean a change in doctrine.

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<sup>110</sup> Peter Prange, “John Philipp Koehler and the Exegetical Task: The Science and Evangelical Art of Biblical Hermeneutics.” [Lecture, 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Reformation Lectures, Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, MN, October 26-27, 2005].

None of this is to say the Wauwatosa method ever sought to despise the fathers or the heritage that was bequeathed to the church through them. The Wauwatosa method simply believes the best way of honoring the fathers is to have every generation directly study the Scriptures and proclaim the unchanging truth to each age. Martin Westerhaus has ably captured the “accent” of the Wauwatosa men with this analysis,

For us in the Wisconsin Synod for whom this heritage (both Hoenecke-Walther as well as Wauwatosa) has been in the family for three or four generations, the familiar words of Goethe apply:

*Was du erbt von deinen Vatern hast,  
Erwirb es um es zu besitzen.*

We need to study and reflect on these truths again and again lest we lose them.<sup>111</sup>

### *The Norwegian Accent*

The Norwegians, on the other hand, are fond of talking about “the old paths” or “the faith of our fathers.” Far from keeping the father’s writings and expressions on reserve, they actively employ them, in their proper context, to show the unity of the church’s confession. One, of course, sees immediately that the Norwegian accent is created from the historical circumstances surrounding the founding of the ELS. The faithful few needed to show that, regardless of how much of the membership of the Norwegian Synod went into the merger, they were spiritually and confessionally the true heirs of Preus, Ottesen, and Koren. These words from H.M. Tjernagel’s 1937 address to the ELS have the clear “Norwegian” accent,

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<sup>111</sup> Martin Westerhaus, “The Wauwatosa Theology: The Men and Their Message,” in *Wauwatosa Theology Volume I*, edited by Curtis Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 85.

Do you not with me feel a certain thrill, tempered with awe, at standing on Wisconsin soil this day? It was Wisconsin soil that bore the great oak under which the first missionary to our pioneer fathers preached. It was Wisconsin's generous forests which gave logs to their cabins and churches. And in her bosom their bodies found rest when their life-work was done.

Conflicts and pitched battles between truth and error, between the conclusions of man and the declarations of God, have been waged on Wisconsin soil. Who can forget the all but bloody conflict at Norway Grove, the reverberations of which were felt strongly in this city?

To us who are worshipping here today and to the Synod we represent, the enemy is routed to this date. By the grace of God "Gegraptai," "It is written," "Thus saith the Lord," is still floated from our mast head, while many who are sailing under the banner "det gode forhold" "Intuitu fidei," which spells synergism. The knowledge of this muffles the exuberance of our joy, but it must not be permitted to reduce the wholeheartedness of our gratitude for the unmerited grace of God through Christ Jesus vouchsafed to us.<sup>112</sup>

Among the Norwegian Lutherans of this country, they, and they alone, now walked the same ground as their predecessors. It was vital to the confessional consciousness of the young synod to recognize that they were being faithful to the Word of God in their lonely stand and, therefore, had not disgraced the wonderful gifts that the Lord had given them through the founding troika. Even to this day, the ELS celebrate two birthdays: 1853 and 1918, and is quick to point out that 1918 is the date of re-organization, not the creation of a new synod. Perhaps a passage from Wilhelm Loehe's *Three Books about the Church* best captures the spirit of the Norwegian Hermeneutic,

If the Lutheran Church has the pure Word and sacrament in a pure confession, it obviously has the highest treasure of

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<sup>112</sup> H.M. Tjernagel, "On Historic Soil – A Revery" (Presidential address to the 19<sup>th</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, Madison, Wisconsin, June, 1937.), 36-37.



the church unperverted. It thus has God's fullness and the living source from which all deficiencies may be supplied, and it can claim for itself all the advantages of which other denominations boast...

It is true that there was much unfaithfulness in our camp and we almost disappeared from sight. But we did not die out, or where did we who fight against you come from? We are the proof of our teaching that the church may become small but it can never die. It can wane like the moon, but it can also wax like the moon...

Our new life was kindled by the Scriptures, and on this they are clear, even if – as you say – they are not on other matters. Here in this shining example it is obvious that you are wrong if you call the Scriptures obscure.

Would you rather have our new life kindled by the writings of the fathers? Good! Then you may be alarmed about these relics of ours – these writings of the deceased fathers – from which we have just now begun to learn how to fight and how not to fight.<sup>113</sup>

Compare also the ELS' usage of the "analogy of faith" with that of the WELS. In George Lillegard's class notes for biblical hermeneutics at Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, he employed the analogy of faith as a hermeneutical principle. There is even a discussion about the analogy of faith as a hermeneutical principle by Paul Zimmerman, a Bethany professor in the 1950s.<sup>114</sup> As late as 1997, the *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* was still discussing the relative merit of using the analogy of faith as a hermeneutical principle.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Wilhelm Loehe, *Three Books about the Church*, Translation by James Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 113-114.

<sup>114</sup> Paul Zimmermann, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Clergy Bulletin* 12, no. 5 (December 1952).

<sup>115</sup> Juul Madson, "The Analogy of Faith," *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 37, no.2 (July 1997). Juul Madson was in a unique position in regards to hermeneutical method. While raised in the ELS and spending his entire ministry serving her as a pastor and professor, he received his ministerial training at Northwestern College, Watertown, WI and his seminary training at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

The Wauwatosia men, Koehler in particular, made it a point to stop using the term “analogy of faith.” There is a discussion of the historic usage of the analogy of faith, but simpler terminology has been developed to teach the same truth without the confusing exegetical and doctrinal baggage that has attached itself to the term. In contrast, the ELS, while quick to recognize the criticisms of the Wauwatosia men and, for the most part, accept their judgments as sound warnings, continue to teach and employ the term in its classical Lutheran form. Zimmerman, for instance, while disagreeing with Koehler’s assertion that “faith” is always used in a subjective sense in the New Testament, goes on to quote Koehler at length regarding the pitfalls of the term as well as its proper sense.<sup>116</sup> Similarly, Juul Madson, while also expressing reservations about the use of the analogy of faith as a hermeneutical principle, even going so far as defending Koehler’s assessment of the problems that developed with the application of this term still sees a dogmatic value in its classical Lutheran usage.<sup>117</sup>

This continued use of the “analogy of faith” as a hermeneutical principle in the ELS underscores the Norwegian desire to maintain a living connection to the faithful confessors of the past. They are wary of “new” expressions and loath to discard anything “old” until it has been shown to be a danger to the church. The Norwegian Hermeneutic therefore, is attuned to “different” or “new” language and insists on testing it before adoption, whereas the Wauwatosia method is less concerned with the historical expression as it is with the substance of what is being expressed.

In the estimation of this writer, it has been the jarring sound of an unfamiliar accent that has been the cause of most, if not all, misunderstandings between the two

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<sup>116</sup> Zimmerman, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 59.

<sup>117</sup> Madson, *The Analogy of Faith*, 17.

synods over the years. But as will become evident in Part II, their heavy accents caused them to listen to each other more closely. The closer they listened, the more they realized that they were speaking the same language while former brothers were not. Furthermore, even when there was serious strain over expression, their common approach to Scripture kept the strain from becoming a break.

One particular incident highlights this fact. In 1943, Juul Madson was an ELS student attending Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. While there, Madson had a sharp disagreement with Professor Paul Peters. The disagreement arose from Madson taking offense at Peters' contention that we are "still in the seventh day of creation."<sup>118</sup> Whether Peters' had been speaking metaphorically or literally is his classroom comments is unknown, but Madson definitely took him to be talking literally and took offense.<sup>119</sup>

Madson then had written to his father, Norman, to discuss his concerns. Norman Madson had written his son back and had laid out what his feelings were regarding the "Seventh-Day Question", laying before Juul what Luther and Stoeckhardt had said regarding the Old Testament Sabbath Day, as well as his argumentation that such a view as purportedly had been voiced by Peters was potentially dangerous.<sup>120</sup> But the personal letter became ammunition for Juul in his disagreement with Peters, and he did not hesitate to fire. He brought the letter to President Edmund Reim, convinced that Peters was in doctrinal error.

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<sup>118</sup> Norman Madson to Juul Madson, letter, March 18, 1943. Norman Madson Papers Box 1, #64. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>119</sup> Peters was known for sometimes pushing the envelope of good sense and academic discussion in the WELS. Professor John Brenner of WLS relayed that there had been a number of private discussions with Peters by faculty members who were upset with his tendency toward academic speculation in the presence of impressionable seminary students.

<sup>120</sup> Norman Madson to Juul Madson.

President Reim felt the need to contact Norman Madson to clarify what he had meant in his personal letter to Juul. Was Norman Madson passing judgment upon a faculty member of WLS? Was there a concern over the doctrinal soundness of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary? In a tone of Christian concern and understanding, Reim wrote to Madson for clarification. In his reply to Reim, Norman Madson writes,

Your kind letter has just been received... What you say to the rather close personal ties which have been developed between us through our mutual association in the controversy on Union is as though spoken out of my own heart. And I trust that my person letter to Juul, in which I sought to hold forth my convictions regarding the "Seventh-Day Question", will not become an ogre which in any way shall undo that personal feeling of true spiritual fellowship...

Let me assure you that if the letter left you with the impression that I was "voicing a vigorous condemnation of a teacher's doctrinal position," I want to say that this was not my intention. I have sought to instill in my boys love and respect for his teachers. If I had not felt that this would be possible for him... at Thiensville, I would most certainly not have encouraged him to go there...

The very fact that you have the Christian courage to write men as you do is evidence of your true concern for our boys. And for this I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart. Yes, it may be that a strain has resulted from this incident, but it is not a strain which will threaten any serious breach...<sup>121</sup>

The situation was cleared up without incident. They spoke the same language, even if the accents caused confusion at times. This recognition of a common theological language but difference of expression and approach is voiced in a letter from George Lillegard to the Board of Regents of Bethany Lutheran College,

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<sup>121</sup> Norman Madson to Edmund Reim, letter, April 13, 1943, Norman Madson Papers Box 1, #84. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

We believe it best to wait until 1945 before trying to open a Seminary, since there are many questions that must be settled before the school can actually be opened...

I have suggested to some of the brethren that the Synod ought to have the chance to consider also some alternative plans such as this, that we ask the Wis. Synod to let us appoint one professor at Thiensville...who would give our students some of the special training the work in our congregations requires...I believe the Wis. Synod would be agreeable to this plan and do not think the differences between us and some of their professors are serious enough to make it impracticable to cooperate with them in a theological school.<sup>122</sup>

In summary, each approach, the Norwegian Hermeneutic and the Wauwatosa method, despite their heavy accents, were nothing more than a conscious return to the *Sola Scriptura* principle. Far from hindering their fraternal relationship, their unique accents would become a blessing, causing them to listen to each other much more closely. In the years to come, these strangers would recognize that despite the historical, cultural and practical differences that they had with each other, they approached the Scriptures the same way, while former brothers and allies would increasingly stray away from pure doctrine and sound practice.

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<sup>122</sup> George Lillegard to the Board of Regents of Bethany Lutheran College, letter, January 13, 1944. ELS Presidential File: 1940s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

## **Part II: Getting to know each other: Fraternal relations (1917-1955)**

### Chapter 1

#### Early relations (1917-1930)

The relations between WELS and ELS grew tremendously during the years 1917-1955 for a number of factors. First, there were geographic reasons. The main concentrations of ELS churches were in areas that were historically tied closer to the Wisconsin Synod: Madison, WI; The Twin Cities area; southern Minnesota, especially the Minnesota River Valley; the Dakotas and the state of Washington. Yet another geographical factor was the purchase of Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato, MN. The lush Minnesota River Valley had been traditionally a Wisconsin Synod area. But with the purchase and development of Bethany Lutheran College and the later establishment of a seminary on the same grounds, Mankato would become the nerve center of the ELS.

Secondly, educational endeavors brought the synods closer together. With the loss of the Norwegian Synod, there was no place for the ELS to train its pastors and teachers. The Synodical Conference opened its institutions to help. The WELS opened Dr. Martin Luther College for the training of teachers in the ELS and had their own professor, Oscar Levorson, serving the Norwegian students. His close relations with the Norwegian Synod combined with his highly respected ability as a teacher at DMLC would greatly enhance the friendship of the WELS and ELS. Furthermore, with the growing doctrinal errors of Missouri, many more Norwegian pastors, in the 1930s and 40s, would attend Northwestern College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and more and more leaders of the ELS would seek WELS trained teachers and pastors to fill their pulpits and classrooms.

Finally, the doctrinal controversies in the Synodical Conference would bring the ELS and the WELS closer and closer together as sister synods the more the Missouri Synod deteriorated in her doctrinal position. In periodicals, conventions and colloquies, the ELS and the WELS found they were talking the same language theologically.

### I. Educational endeavors (1922-46)

There is perhaps no single factor for the growth of fraternal relations between the WELS and ELS greater than the use of one another's educational institutions. Through these educational institutions the pastors and teachers of the ELS and the WELS found they had a common approach to Scripture, a shared passion for Christian education, especially the Lutheran Elementary School, and a trusted friend during the painful breakup of the Synodical Conference.

Following the Lime Creek meeting of 1918, the ELS was faced with two practical problems. First, they had no educational institutions for the training of pastors. Second, a majority of the congregations also had Lutheran Elementary Schools (one of the greatest blessings the Lord had bequeathed to this group) which meant they would also need to have a steady supply of Lutheran grade school teachers. At this early stage of ELS history, there was only one alternative, “[the Synod] had adopted the easy but the only way out, namely, of urging our students to attend the schools of Missouri and Wisconsin synods.”<sup>123</sup>

After being accepted into membership in the Synodical Conference in 1920, the Norwegians immediately set about finding arrangements for the training of their young people for the ministry. The Missouri Synod had offered Concordia College-St. Paul and

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<sup>123</sup> S.C. Ylvisaker, “Our Twentieth Anniversary,” *Lutheran Sentinel* 30, no.18 (October 1947), 279.

Concordia Theological Seminary – St. Louis, for the training of pastoral students. Professor S.C. Ylvisaker, who had recently resigned his position at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa for conscience sake, was soon placed as the Norwegian professor at Concordia-St. Paul.

But it would not be Ylvisaker's time at Concordia that would bring him to the notice and appreciation of the Wisconsin Synod, but rather as the president of Bethany Lutheran College. Ylvisaker assumed the helm of Bethany after a seven-year return to parish ministry in Madison, WI. Under his guidance, Bethany would not only succeed academically, but it even thrived during years of depression and war. It would also be a time of increased contact with Wisconsin Synod students, pastors, and teachers, all of whom began to appreciate Ylvisaker not only as the bright academic light guiding the fledgling school but also a staunch confessor of the Lutheran faith.

Ylvisaker's reputation among Wisconsin Synod pastors and teachers as a great educator as well as sound theologian can be seen in the 1934 invitation of Ylvisaker to give the key note address at the then recently established Winnebago Lutheran Academy, Fond Du Lac, WI. The Wisconsin Synod pastors and teachers were so impressed with the content of the address that it was reprinted in the *Quartalschrift* a few months later.

Ylvisaker would continue to strengthen fraternal relations between the Wisconsin Synod and the Norwegian Synod also through his work in the larger Synodical Conference. He served as a member on the Board for Foreign Missions, as well as the vice-president of the Synodical Conference. In this latter position, he would leave an indelible impression on the minds and hearts of many Wisconsin Synod men. At the 1950 meeting of the Synodical Conference in Fort Wayne, IN, Ylvisaker filled in for the ailing



E.B. Schluetter, and delivered the presidential address. Instead of a glossed over address full of ecclesiastical niceties, Ylvisaker made a frank and open call against the unionism that was now fully present in the Synodical Conference. In remembering Ylvisaker's bold address, E.C. Fredrich commented, "Those at the Fort Wayne Convention will never forget the man nor the address."<sup>124</sup> The height of the respect that S.C. Ylvisaker held among the men of the Wisconsin Synod is perhaps best captured by President John Brenner in a letter of well-wishes written to Ylvisaker on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his presidency at BLC,

Dear Doctor Ylvisaker:

We read: "And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers."

Every servant of the Lord who is faithful in his ministry of preaching the truth and rebuking error and evil is a gift of our Exalted Lord to His Church for its edification, even if his field of labor should be remote and circumscribed.

But you have worked before our eyes, within our hearing, and at our sides, these many years, and we have been permitted to partake of the fruit of your labors more directly.

Therefore we are glad to join the members of your Synod and the many other brethren on this occasion to give thanks to the Lord for the grace He has bestowed on you and wrought through you during the forty years of your ministry.

We pray that your voice of testimony will be heard among us for many years to come.

Yours in Christ our Lord,

The Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of

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<sup>124</sup> E.C. Fredrich, "Review of SC Ylvisaker 1884-1959 Commemorative Volume" *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 82, no.2 (summer 1985), 233.

Wisconsin and Other States,

By,

President John Brenner<sup>125</sup>

But there would be another Norwegian professor who would also prove invaluable to the growth of the fraternal relations between the ELS and the Wisconsin Synod. In 1920, the Norwegian committee asked permission to have its teachers trained at DMLC, and President Edmund Bliefernicht of DMLC heartily obliged. Yet a small problem arose. No one on the faculty spoke Norwegian, and the Norwegian Synod felt that there needed to be a Norwegian instructor, like Ylvisaker at Concordia-St. Paul, who could look after the needs of the Norwegian students studying on campus. This was especially needed at DMLC since in 1920 the language of instruction was still German. President Bliefernicht told the 1921 convention of the Norwegian Synod that DMLC would be open to their students, but it was their hope that the Norwegian Synod could provide a man who might tend to the special needs of the ELS students.<sup>126</sup> The Norwegian Synod had such a highly qualified man to fill this position by the name of Oscar Levorson. Levorson came to the New Ulm campus for the 1922-23 school year and would remain until his retirement in 1963.

It is interesting to compare Ylvisaker and Levorson. Ylvisaker was a pre-eminent scholar, theologian and educator. He was much sought after as a speaker and a force in the Synodical Conference. Ylvisaker earned a PhD in Semitic languages at the University of Leipzig. Ylvisaker was the son of Johannes Ylvisaker, the pre-eminent New Testament scholar who authored *The Gospels*, a text still used today by many New Testament

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<sup>125</sup> John Brenner to S.C. Ylvisaker, letter, June 6, 1950, WLS Archives, the Brenner Collection #76, Mequon, WI.

<sup>126</sup> Aaberg, *City Set on a Hill*, 92.

students. Ylvisaker had resigned his position at Luther College for confessional reasons and had strained relations with his own family following the merger. It was Ylvisaker's great talent that attributed to the success of Bethany Lutheran College. Yet, it is quite possible that Levorson's more than 40 years at DMLC probably did as much, if not more, to create and strengthen fraternal ties with the Wisconsin Synod.

Levorson was a man from humble roots. He was the son of Norwegian farmers in northern Iowa and the grandson of Norwegian immigrants. Like Ylvisaker, Levorson too had resigned his position at the Luther Academy, Albert Lea, MN. Levorson saw his home congregation fractured by the merger. He was college and university educated, earning a BA from Luther College and taking graduate level courses at the University of Iowa, but he was neither a pastor nor a theologian. Levorson had also seen Europe, not from the comfort of a university desk, but from the muddy trenches of France as a soldier serving in WWI.<sup>127</sup> And yet, this man had a unique combination of gifts that served to develop and strengthen the bonds between the two synods.

During Levorson's first decade at DMLC, he gave annual reports to the ELS, which prove to be enlightening about not only Levorson, but the state of the relationship between the ELS and the WELS during these years. First, the reports unintentionally attest to his popularity. During his first year at DMLC, there were only 3 students from the Norwegian Synod.<sup>128</sup> In 1924, the number had risen to 8.<sup>129</sup> By 1925 the number had

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<sup>127</sup> Levorson served in the 61<sup>st</sup> Infantry Battalion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division of the American Expeditionary Force. Levorson rose to the rank of sergeant and saw action at St. Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. At least two men from the 61<sup>st</sup> infantry were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for heroics in these battles.

<sup>128</sup> Oscar Levorson, "Report from Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN." New Hampton, IA, 1924 Convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church.

<sup>129</sup> Levorson, DLMC report of 1924.

risen to 12.<sup>130</sup> When one considers the German-culture of New Ulm and that the Wisconsin Synod was really an unknown entity to most Norwegian Synod members early on, it strongly attests to Levorson's talents as a teacher and his care for the students under his charge. But it is Levorson's passion for Christian education, a passion that rivaled even his German brethren, that show him an ideal fit for New Ulm,

We have had repeatedly pointed out to us the danger of hearing the preaching of false doctrine. Allow me to point out that this danger is the same, whether the false doctrine is preached by a minister or taught by a teacher. It is necessary, not only to have ministers and teachers thoroughly founded in the doctrines of the church, but also to have laymen so founded. Let this be done first of all at the home and the congregation; and secondly; whenever a high school education is desired; let our boys and girls get this at a Christian School.<sup>131</sup>

Furthermore, Edmund Bliefernicht gave this description of Levorson shortly after he joined the faculty of DMLC,

However, we were fortunate to secure help by the aid of the staunch minority of the Norwegian Lutheran Church, the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church. By their aid Prof. Oscar Levorson came to help carry part of our work. Prof. Levorson is a graduate of Luther College, Decorah, Iowa. He has several years of experience in the classroom. *But what is of more value, he shares our views on Christian education and its relationship to the state.*<sup>132</sup> (Emphasis mine)

In addition to these words of praise, it was also noted in the article that Levorson taught the highest number of periods of any faculty member during his first year at DMLC,

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<sup>130</sup> Levorson, DMLC report of 1925.

<sup>131</sup> Levorson, DMLC report of 1924.

<sup>132</sup> Edmund Bliefernicht, "DMLC Report" *Northwestern Lutheran* 9, no. 19 (September 17, 1922), 300.

teaching English, Norse, Latin, Algebra, US history, and Religion.<sup>133</sup> In addition, he was also drafted to coach basketball during his first decade at DMLC.<sup>134</sup>

Levorson was described by former colleagues and students as being methodical in organization, firm in discipline, but gentle in guidance. President emeritus of DMLC Conrad Frey, one of Levorson's early students who later became known for his command of English prose and oratory, relayed many years later, "It was Oscar Levorson who taught me how to write a sentence."<sup>135</sup> So popular and esteemed was Levorson by his fellow professors that he was encouraged by his fellow professors to put off retiring for almost a decade, until health finally forced him to lay down his duties.<sup>136</sup>

His popularity and talent are further attested to by the change in status of Levorson's call and compensation. The Norwegian Synod's education committee reported in 1923 that the Norwegian paid a percentage of his \$1200.00 yearly salary in proportion to the number of students.<sup>137</sup> By 1925, the Board of Education of the Norwegian Synod reported, "At New Ulm, the brethren of the Wisconsin Synod have called Professor Oscar Levorson as a permanent professor, and he will continue in charge of the work in Norwegian."<sup>138</sup> In short, the faculty in New Ulm did not want to lose Levorson. In a personal letter to Levorson, the secretary of the Board of Control of DMLC, Herbert Sitz urged Levorson to remain at DMLC as a full faculty member.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Blieferticht, "DMLC Report", 300.

<sup>134</sup> Morton Schroeder, *A Time to Remember* (New Ulm: Dr. Martin Luther College Press, 1984), 93.

<sup>135</sup> Ruth and Leroy Levorson interviewed by author, Lake Mills IA, August 28, 2008.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Oscar Levorson, "Report from Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN." Princeton, MN, 1923 Convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church.

<sup>138</sup> Oscar Levorson, "Report from Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN." St. Peter, MN, 1925 Convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church.

<sup>139</sup> Ruth and Leroy Levorson interviewed by author, Lake Mills IA, August 28, 2008.

During his time at DMLC, Levorson was also the unofficial ambassador and go-between for officials of both synods. Levorson maintained friendships with key members of both the Norwegian Synod and the Wisconsin Synod and these friendships in turn proved to be a useful when problems arose. Whether it was WWII draft issues, the need of an ELS Lutheran Elementary School for a teacher, or a doctrinal issue that needed discussion, people from both synods contacted Levorson. One such key friendship that Levorson maintained was with Norman Madson of the ELS. Some of the most delightful reading found in the ELS archives at Bethany Lutheran Seminary is the correspondence between Norman Madson and Oscar Levorson. Their correspondence is a mixture of deep discussion both of practical and theological issues, peppered with light-hearted humor. On March 31, 1939, Madson wrote to Levorson,

Dear Oscar,

No, this is not preparatory to the first fishing expedition of the 1939 season, though that will have to be attended to ohne Aufschub. It is rather of a more solemn nature. We are again in need of a teacher for our day school....

By the way, you will let me hear from you at your convenience... Will you be at the Marshall meet[ing] on April 25-26? It is going to be an historic event, if I don't miss my guess. The lines are drawing tighter on the union sector, and something will have to break sooner or later. This spiritual philandering cannot go on forever. If Mo. wants to fraternize with Augustana and Norwegian Merger and the Free Church, she will have to do so, but I am not going to keep her company anymore in that event...

But, by the roadside, did you hear the announcement last evening (from the state capitol) that the legislature had decided to make the pike limit a 6-day affair the coming year? Rise in righteous wrath and indignation, brother

Waltonite, and scare ‘em into retraction. That measly limit will simply not do – NOHOW!<sup>140</sup>

It is clear from the Madson-Levorson correspondence that Levorson, even after he left the official auspices of the ELS, remained a valuable asset for the relations between the two synods. It is clear, especially when it comes to the placement of teaching candidates that Madson counts on Levorson’s judgment and candor in finding a man or woman who will “fit” well within the congregational life of the ELS.

Levorson’s friendships also ran deep within the ranks of the Wisconsin Synod. Levorson was made life-long friendships with many members of the DMLC faculty during his years of service. He was the sponsor for Thomas Trapp, the son of his good friend in the English Department, Cornelius Trapp. He was known for his famous “Friday pie and ice cream excursions” with fellow bachelor professor Erich Sievert.<sup>141</sup> One of his dearest friends was Edmund Bliefernicht, his fellow professor on the faculty at DMLC for 25 years. John Oldfield’s account of Edmund Bliefernicht’s sudden death in 1947 gives a touching view of the closeness between Bliefernicht and Levorson,

I started to walk up to Franklin toward Second and here was a man just running and wondering what to do because he said, “The professor dropped over.” And here was Professor Bliefernicht lying in the snow bank. He was dead by that time. Anyway, he told me that he had already called Mrs. Bliefernicht. So I tried to call Professor Schweppe, but I couldn’t get him. We went to a family that lived on the corner ... I used their phone, and evidently Professor Schweppe was up on the hill already... I got on the bus. When Professor Levorson got on the bus and sat with me, he said, “Where is your seat partner?” And I had to tell him. I could see that it certainly hit Levy very, very hard.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Norman Madson to Oscar Levorson, letter, May 4, 1938. ELS Presidential Files: 1930s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>141</sup> Ruth and Leroy Levorson, interviewed by author, Lake Mills IA, August 28, 2008

<sup>142</sup> Morton Schroeder, *A Time to Remember*, 119.

Levorson retired from DMLC in 1963, having given the better portion of his life in service to his sister synod. Upon his retirement, he returned to the Levorson family farm in Worth County, Iowa, attending services at his family's congregation of three generations at Lime Creek, Iowa. As a final testimony of gratitude to the man who had so faithfully served the Wisconsin Synod, the *Northwestern Lutheran* reported that 14 of his former colleagues at DMLC and MLA served as honorary pallbearers at Levorson's funeral.<sup>143</sup>

But the fraternal hand offered by the Wisconsin Synod would be extended twice more when the halls of Northwestern College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary were opened. As was stated earlier, the original pastor training arrangement was through the Concordia System. Most, if not all pastors during the first 18 years of the Synod followed that route. But with the fellowship issues with Missouri looming in the 1930s and as a greater feeling of fraternity grew between the ELS and the WELS, and definitely by the time when scouting and chaplaincy became an issue, the ELS began to guide their pastoral candidates away from the Concordia System to Northwestern College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. There was even talk as late as 1945 to establish a Norwegian professorship at Thiensville until such time as they could establish a seminary of their own.<sup>144</sup> During these years there were Harstads, Madsons, and Tjernagels studying beside Zarlings, Kolanders and Albrechts. Even when Bethany did establish its own seminary in Mankato in 1946, President Reim of WLS and Professor Bliefert of

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<sup>143</sup> "Obituary of Oscar Levorson" *Northwestern Lutheran* 61, no. 25 (December 2, 1974), 408.

<sup>144</sup> Aaberg, *City Set on a Hill*, 120.



DMLC were fraternal visitors at the festivities rejoicing in the ELS' new educational endeavor.<sup>145</sup>

It should also be noted that many of the Norwegian men thrived in the WELS system. Juul Madson had mastered German so well that he was chosen to give the German oration at the Northwestern College graduations ceremonies.<sup>146</sup> Even more touching is a letter from ELS Vice-President Joseph Peterson to President Naumann following the death of Professor Meyer,

I want to express my regrets for being unable to attend Professor Meyer's funeral service. I had just returned from a week's absence, and I found pressing congregational duties upon my return. I am one of the few from our Synod privileged to sit at the feet of Professor Meyer in the classroom. He always impressed me with his keen memory of details, his precise method of teaching, and his simple faith in the truths of Holy Scripture. I am sure that the Wisconsin Synod especially will miss the presence and the guidance of this Christian gentleman.<sup>147</sup>

The hand of love and brotherhood that the WELS offered to the ELS was never forgotten. Theodore Aaberg writes, "It was a stirring demonstration of Christian love and fellowship that the ELS did not hesitate to seek help from the Missouri and Wisconsin brethren and that these noble brethren themselves were quick to offer their services, and to respond to every need. The gracious and solicitous care which these synods showed to their little brother, the ELS, is unsurpassed in the annals of church fellowship."<sup>148</sup>

The WELS also would continue to assist the ELS in the years to come with the placement of Bethany Seminary graduates. With the Synodical Conference dissolving,

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Personal comment by ELS archivist Paul Madson, younger brother of Juul Madson.

<sup>147</sup> Joseph Peterson to Oscar Naumann, letter, November 14, 1964. ELS Presidential files: 1960s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>148</sup> Aaberg, 92.

the ELS no longer wanted to place their men in LCMS congregations. In response to this need of their sister synod, Oscar Naumann wrote to Norman Madson, Dean of Bethany Seminary, “We would be more than happy to have you give our Committee on Assignment of Calls...any names of candidates whom you and your faculty would recommend to us...I am also writing President Teigen with regard to any teacher candidates who may be available to us.”<sup>149</sup> Naumann also gives evidence of his high regard for his ELS brethren as he passes on his condolences at the recent death of Erling Ylvisaker and prays that the Lord send more faithful laborers like him into his Kingdom.<sup>150</sup>

The shared educational endeavors also had the inevitable result of bringing key figures from both synods into a closer practical and fraternal relationship. One issue in particular was a conflict both the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods had with the Minnesota State Draft Board over the classification of parochial school teachers as 1-A (eligible for service) instead of 4-D (exempt for religious service). Nelson, the Minnesota state director of the draft board, stubbornly refused to exempt male parochial school teachers from the draft.

This had proved to be a particular problem for Our Savior’s Congregation (ELS), Princeton, MN of which Norman Madson was the pastor. Correspondence shows that Madson, for a period of almost 3 years, had been desperately trying to get a permanent teacher for the Our Savior’s grade school. Finally, Robert Meyer, a New Ulm graduate,

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<sup>149</sup> Oscar Naumann to Norman Madson, letter, April 7, 1954, ELS-WELS Correspondence 1919-1990: O.J. Naumann letters to Bethany Lutheran College and Seminary, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, Mequon, WI.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

accepted a call to serve his sister synod. Problem solved, that is, until the Minnesota State Draft Board ceased to exempt male parochial school teachers from military service.

John Brenner, then president of the Wisconsin Synod, had already helped the Norwegian Synod with its parochial school teachers in Wisconsin who found themselves 1-A. In a letter dated February 1, 1942, he offers his assistance to Norman Madson of the Norwegian Synod for his Minnesota problem.<sup>151</sup> In addition to Brenner, President Carl Scheweppe of DMLC also wrote to Madson offering his support during the draft issue and his shared mutual disgust of “that Swede” Nelson.<sup>152</sup>

In 1927, the Norwegian Synod would purchase Bethany Lutheran College. Under the influence and leadership of S.C. Ylvisaker, the college would fill a unique niche in Lutheran education for the church, providing laity with a Christ-centered, solidly Lutheran education for their first two years of college. Bethany would also help the Wisconsin Synod by helping train its second career men from 1962-1988, in what was lovingly referred to as the “Meq-Beth” (Mequon/Bethany) program.

The educational institutions of these two synods were seed bed for the first real fraternal relationships between the WELS and ELS. It was on the campuses of Bethany, DMLC, Northwestern and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary where the synods really got to know one another for the first time directly, synod to synod, and it would prove valuable in the practical and doctrinal conflicts of the coming years.

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<sup>151</sup> John Brenner to Norman Madson, letter, October 11, 1941, John Brenner Collection, File #156. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mequon, WI.

<sup>152</sup> Carl Scheweppe to Norman Madson, letter, February 9, 1942, ELS Presidential Files: 1940s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

## II. First impressions: Bethany Lutheran College and the East Madison Case

There is a great different between knowing each other and knowing of each other. Before 1920, it can be safely said that there were only intermittent direct contacts between members of the ELS and the Wisconsin Synod. During the 1920s, direct synodical contact between the WELS and ELS would increase tremendously. Two vignettes, the purchase of Bethany Lutheran College and the East Madison Case, will provide fitting snapshots at the state of relations that each synod had with the other at the beginning of the 1920s and in turn give a good baseline by which to measure the growth the fraternal relations between each other in the coming years.

### *The Purchase of Bethany Lutheran College*

Bethany Lutheran College has been another ambassador of the ELS to many Wisconsin Synod men and women. The location of Bethany in Mankato, MN, so close in proximity to DMLC in New Ulm, would also play a major factor in the growth of fraternal relationships and correspondence between the synods and their officials. But the circumstances surrounding the ELS' purchase of Bethany proved to create an initially tense situation with the WELS.

Bethany began its existence in 1911 as a Lutheran academy for girls run by the Evangelical Lutheran Education Association (ELEA), a corporation formed by pastors and laymen of the Synodical Conference.<sup>153</sup> Unfortunately for ELEA, the Bethany

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<sup>153</sup> The leading force behind ELEA was Rev. Albert Winter, the pastor of Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Mankato, MN, a WELS congregation. The other original men involved were Rev. A.C. Haase and A. Emmel, both WELS pastors in St. Paul. Winter's zeal for Bethany was not matched with his ability, and many, if not most of the problems that occurred happened because of his poor management. His position within the college seems to have constantly been changing. One source describes him as the president of the board of Bethany during the early years of Bethany (Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church, "History of Immanuel -1867-1967," <http://www.immanuelmankato.org/history/1967/history1> (Accessed July 14,

experiment never really took off, primarily because its mission was not directly supported by any specific synod of the Synodical Conference and the gross mismanagement of the college.<sup>154</sup> By 1919 financial and educational problems plagued the academy so much that eight students of Bethany, while not being incorporated into DMLC, formed their own unit on the New Ulm Campus and took courses which DMLC offered compatible with their aims.<sup>155</sup> In 1919, the school reorganized and a stock company formed under the direction of leading Mankato businessmen. This committee tried to liquidate the debt by issuing stock to investors in the school. However, shady accounting and dubious business practices led to the even greater erosion of the school's fiscal standing.<sup>156</sup>

There was also worry that Bethany College and ELEA would impinge upon the work of DMLC in that it would be training some of the young women for parochial school work. At the 1919 WELS Convention, held at New Ulm, the newly formed creditor committee of BLC gave DMLC assurance that it would not do this. That convention also appointed two men from the WELS to act in an advisory capacity with

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2010). In 1922, Winter resigned as pastor from Immanuel and shortly before the transfer of Bethany to the ELS, he was listed as president of the faculty. Archival correspondence lists him in June, 1924, as the president of ELEA, with W.F. Georg as president of the college. In July, 1924, Winter was listed as the president of the college. In a letter to Hans Moussa, Professor Stindt of DMLC writes, "We feel that the recommendation of our synod be withdrawn as long as Rev. Winters, Rev. Stock, Rev. Georg, and Mr. Keller are connected with the management of Bethany." (A.G Stindt to Hans K. Moussa, letter, January 8, 1924, WELS-ELS Correspondence 1919-1990: Committee investigating matters regarding Bethany Lutheran College, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, Mequon, WI).

<sup>154</sup> Some of the mismanagement reported was the sale of personal property, including musical instruments; out of the building and that the money from the sale had been taken without authority and spent for personal and private use. It was also charged that the office was locked to hide evidence from the eye of the public and the stockholders and officers of Bethany. "Bethany College" *The Bulletin: The Official Organ of the National Lutheran Education Association*, volume VII, no. 26 (October-December 1924), 1.

<sup>155</sup> Schroeder, *A Time to Remember*, 68-69.

<sup>156</sup> The reporters go on to tell that two sets of books were kept, one for the school and one for the corporation. Furthermore, there were no records for the years 1920-1924. Report to the Stockholders of Bethany Lutheran College, pg 4, WELS-ELS Correspondence 1919-1990: Committee investigating matters regarding Bethany Lutheran College, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, Mequon, WI.

the board of directors of Bethany. After these assurances, DMLC and WELS gave Bethany moral support after its reorganization.<sup>157</sup>

Douglas Horton once said, “Desperation is like stealing from the Mafia: you stand a good chance of attracting the wrong attention.” The desperation of ELEA to make a Bethany a success led to a number of foolish, unbrotherly, and doctrinally questionable decisions. In February of 1923, the school’s registrar, O.C. Torgerson, using DMLC letterhead, contacted a Mr. Claus Gieschen in Milwaukee offering to him the names of some of the graduates of Bethany Ladies College as candidates for call lists. Not only did this violate Bethany’s pledge to DMLC, but the Torgerson had sidestepped the District President, DMLC President Bliefert, and given a false impression by using DMLC letterhead that this procedure had been cleared with school officials.<sup>158</sup> Eight days later President Bliefert registered his protest with Bethany Lutheran College and demanded an explanation for this unchristian behavior.<sup>159</sup> Torgerson replied with a vague answer that did not fit the facts or the pledge that Bethany had made to DMLC. Torgerson asserted that graduates of Bethany were qualified to teach in Synodical Conference schools and that some Bethany graduates had been doing so already to fill the need for vacancies.<sup>160</sup> Bliefert responded that Torgerson’s explanation was beside the

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> O.C. Torgerson to C. Gieschen, letter, February 20, 1923, WELS-ELS Correspondence 1919-1990: Committee investigating matters regarding Bethany Lutheran College, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, Mequon, WI. Torgerson was a noted advocate and educator within the Norwegian Synod before the Madison Settlement. Whether Torgerson had been part of the faculty of Bethany when the Madison Settlement occurred, yet he remained in contact with many educators within that synod who went along with the merger. Claus Gieschen would leave the WELS for the Protestant Controversy and become one of her chief historians.

<sup>159</sup> Edmund Bliefert to Bethany Lutheran College, letter, February 28, 1923, WELS-ELS Correspondence 1919-1990: Committee investigating matters regarding Bethany Lutheran College, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, Mequon, WI.

<sup>160</sup> O.C. Torgerson to Edmund Bliefert, letter, March 15, 1923, WELS-ELS Correspondence 1919-1990: Committee investigating matters regarding Bethany Lutheran College, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, Mequon, WI.

point. Bethany had not been entrusted with the office of training teachers for work in the Wisconsin Synod therefore it was presuming a role that it not only did not have, but had pledged not to assume.<sup>161</sup>

Relations would dissolve further as the year progressed. In addition to the issue above, it was published in the Bethany summer school catalogue that one of its instructors would be Professor Hilleboe, an instructor at the Augustana Normal School in Rapid City, SD. Both Professor Hilleboe and the Augustana Normal School were members of the ELC.<sup>162</sup> This was a great offense to Bliefernicht, especially since a member of the DMLC faculty, Oscar Levorson, had resigned from his position at a similar normal school in the ELC to join the ELS. Now a teacher from a heterodox church body would be instructing students at Bethany, the same students that Torgerson had been trying to place in Synodical Conference schools. In response to these violations, as well as the poor and doctrinally questionable judgment in making them, Bliefernicht filed protest against Bethany in the *Gemeindeblatt* and the *Northwestern Lutheran* as well as withdrawing DMLC's moral support of Bethany given in 1919.

While this was happening, the two-man WELS advisory committee appointed to advise the board of directors of Bethany became increasingly cognizant of the shady practices that were occurring. By 1921, the two-man committee recommended to the WELS that a larger committee be appointed to investigate matters more fully. Archival

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<sup>161</sup> Edmund Bliefernicht to O.C. Torgerson, letter, March 24, 1923, WELS-ELS Correspondence 1919-1990: Committee investigating matters regarding Bethany Lutheran College, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, Mequon, WI.

<sup>162</sup> Edmund Bliefernicht to A.F. Winter, letter, June 15, 1923, WELS-ELS Correspondence 1919-1990: Committee investigating matters regarding Bethany Lutheran College, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, Mequon, WI. While Levorson's objections to this are not mentioned, it is a certainty that Levorson was angered by this action given his brave confessional stand. Given the close personal relationship between Levorson and Bliefernicht, it is hard to imagine that Levorson had not weighed in on the matter.

correspondence has reconstructed the committee to have consisted of Professor Stindt and Bliefernicht of DMLC, Pastor William Nommensen, Pastor Julius Bergholz, Pastor Otto Kuhlow, Pastor Hans Moussa, and Mr. William Graebner.<sup>163</sup> Their report, at first withheld from the creditor committee of Bethany by the board of control, was eventually reworded and recast to give the opposite impression of what the report was trying to convey.<sup>164</sup> The result of this action by the board of control was the withdrawal of the public support of Bethany by the WELS.

During this time, there were several attempts to sell the school. One striking offer came from the National Lutheran Education Association (NLEA), another group within the Synodical Conference. Berhardt Holst, the president of NLEA, made the made an offer to the board through the Minnesota branch of NLEA (Dr. Schlesselmann, Mr. Emil Boie, and Rev. Adolph Ackermann, pastor at Immanuel in Mankato and former president of DMLC) in 1923 to purchase the property and the school, but the offer was rejected because the stockholders who had invested in the Bethany were basically asked to eat their losses and receive nothing for their investment as well as come up with an additional 25,000 to liquidate the standing debt.

The fallout of these situations plus the fiscal irresponsibility of the current board of control was twofold. The stockholders transferred control of Bethany to a new board of control in June of 1924. That board of control quickly came to the conclusion that Bethany could never reach its goals due to the great friction that had been created during

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<sup>163</sup> William Nommensen was the vice-president of the Western Wisconsin District; Julius Bergholz was a pastor in Lacrosse, WI; Otto Kuhlow was a pastor in Jefferson, Wisconsin; Hans Moussa was pastor in Fond Du Lac, WI; William Graebner was the younger brother of August Graebner as well as the city treasure of Milwaukee.

<sup>164</sup> *The Bulletin*, 2. In a handwritten marginal note, Professor Stindt wrote, "Ruft wir Wahrheit!" (We proclaimed the truth!)



the internal shake-up at Bethany and the friction the outgoing board had made with the WELS and DMLC. Therefore, it was the recommendation of the board that the school be offered to the Wisconsin Synod for purchase for the following reasons: 1) the enrollment of DMLC was increasing and more space was needed; 2) the faculty at DMLC desired a separate campus for the preparatory training of young women for the teaching ministry; 3) Bethany is already fully equipped and purchasable for a lower than market price; 4) the purchase would keep the college from entering into receivership, thus saving the investors from notable financial loss.<sup>165</sup>

The offer was discussed by the Wisconsin Synod at its 1925 convention and it was decided that the WELS would purchase the school. The committee involved with the purchase of Bethany appointed and empowered Adolph Ackermann, Otto Kuhlow, and William Graebner to work out the details of the purchase. This committee began preliminary meetings with the Bethany board of control and the sale was being worked out. However, Adolph Ackermann, for reasons not entirely clear, stated to the Mankato Free Press that the sale had failed and negotiations had been dropped.<sup>166</sup> This report caused great disturbance for the Wisconsin Synod board of trustees, the board of control of Bethany, the other members of the WELS negotiating committee, and last but not least, the stockholders of Bethany. Despite J.W.F. Pieper's, secretary for Bethany board of control, attempts to correct the false reporting, Ackermann's actions brought the seemingly simple sale to a grinding halt.<sup>167</sup>

At the WELS board of trustees' meeting on November 12, 1925, the matter of Ackermann's poor judgment in reporting private dealings to the Mankato Free Press was

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<sup>165</sup> Report to the stockholders, 10-12.

<sup>166</sup> Report to the stockholders, 15.

<sup>167</sup> J.W.F. Pieper was a pastor of Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church, Stillwater, MN (WELS).

brought up for discussion. The Bethany representatives charged that Pastor Ackermann was guilty of a breach of confidence and did not present the facts.<sup>168</sup> After much discussion, President Bergemann of the Wisconsin Synod remarked, “Although I do not sanction the article, I take exception to some things in the letter of Bethany College, and furthermore, let it be said that you must not dictate.” To this, Pastor Dornfeldt added that Pastor Ackermann was just the type of man they wanted on the committee. The members of the board of control of Bethany were shocked that Ackermann would be so vindicated of wrongdoing. Mr. Hugo Torgler of Bethany went so far as to say, “The deal is off.”<sup>169</sup> Pastor Pieper went on to explain that Bethany did not intend to dictate, but only had the intention of laying the facts before the trustees of the WELS, being certain that the board of trustees of the WELS would and could not be in accord with the article in the Free Press which quoted Ackermann.<sup>170</sup> The meeting ended with a plan for the WELS lawyer, Ernst von Briesen, to meet in December with the Bethany lawyers, together with Pastor Ackermann and Pastor Pieper to get the negotiations back on track.

But the December meeting turned out to be a fiasco, again, due to Ackermann. Briesen wished to meet with Pastor Ackermann before he met with the Bethany lawyers and Pastor Pieper. But not only was Pastor Ackermann late to the meeting, but a committee from DMLC (Bliefernicht, Hinnenthal, and Stindt) arrived at Ackermann’s invitation. This DMLC contingent, meeting with Ackermann and von Briesen, made the Bethany contingent wait for almost an hour before the meeting commenced. When the meeting was finally called, the Bethany committee refused to meet with the DMLC contingent since they had not been invited to the negotiations. The situation was again

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<sup>168</sup> Report to the stockholders, 20.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

growing tense, not only among those appointed for negotiations, but also among the stockholders. Mr. Schmidt, the lawyer for Bethany, warned Bethany would have to be foreclosed upon if something was not decided and soon. These delays were costing valuable time.

But the slow and tedious working out of details would be brought to a screeching halt by the end of December, once again, by Ackermann. Just a few days after the Mankato meeting, Rev. Pieper informed Rev. Kuhlow that a member of the Mankato Chamber of Commerce had informed him that a rumor was being spread abroad Mankato that he had defrauded widows and orphans. It became clear that the rumors had been created by comments made by Ackermann, who was blaming the delay of negotiations upon Pieper.<sup>171</sup> At a meeting of the Mankato Chamber of Commerce with both Pieper and Ackermann present, Pieper announced, “These statements are deliberate lies. That the deal was not closed has its reason only in this that Rev. Ackermann has not shown a spirit of friendliness but hostility to the matter.” At this point, the Chamber of Commerce was asked to help with the sale of Bethany. They quickly came to the conclusion that Rev. Pieper had done all that was humanly possible to close the deal. Furthermore, they suggested that Ackermann be eliminated from the negotiations.<sup>172</sup>

It is at this point that the ELS officially entered the picture. Holden Olsen, the president of the Bethany, made a plea to his Norwegian brothers to take the bargain that had been offered to the Wisconsin Synod.<sup>173</sup> With the demise of the original Bethany

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<sup>171</sup> Report to the stockholders, 22-23.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Holden Olsen was one of the original 13 pastors who refused to go along with the Madison Settlement and formed the ELS in 1918. He had been the pastor of Our Saviour’s Congregation in Madison, WI and in 1922, he had taken the call to Bethany. He was succeeded at Our Saviour’s by S.C. Ylvisaker. Although some sources list that he had left to take the presidency of Bethany, it is clear that it was not until the shake-

imminent, and working under the assumption that the Wisconsin Synod had passed on the property, Drs. Pfothenauer and Pieper of the Missouri Synod also urged the ELS to buy the property for their use. They pointed out that the ELS was in need of an institution of higher learning to properly perform its mission.<sup>174</sup> With the thought that it might be possible for the ELS to have its own college to train members for service as laymen and clergy, Christian Anderson wrote to ELS President George Gullixson, “It would be a crime not to look into the matter further.”<sup>175</sup>

On April 9, 1926, von Briesen, the attorney representing the Wisconsin Synod, wrote to the attorneys representing Bethany College, “Although the Board left the matter to the Synodical Committee at its meeting on May 4<sup>th</sup>, I do not hesitate to say that in my opinion the Synod will not purchase Bethany.”<sup>176</sup> With such a reply, the Norwegian Synod moved ahead and purchased Bethany. They met the purchase deadline of April 21, 1926 and by July 21, they had raised 20,000 for the initial payment for the college.<sup>177</sup>

But, as Ylvisaker later recounts, “the impression had gone abroad in certain circles of the Wisconsin Synod, and the impression persisted, that we had not given the committee of the Wisconsin Synod a fair chance to buy.”<sup>178</sup> Ackermann in particular was upset when he found out that the college had been sold to the Norwegian Synod.

Ackermann accused von Briesen and the ELS president Gullixson of carrying on dealing

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up of Bethany in June of 1924 that he officially held the reigns of the institution. He would guide the Bethany until 1929. The Lord called Pastor Olsen to his eternal rest in 1942.

<sup>174</sup> Ylvisaker, *Our Twentieth Anniversary*, 280.

<sup>175</sup> Built on the Rock, 115.

<sup>176</sup> Ylvisaker, *Our Twentieth Anniversary*, 280.

<sup>177</sup> Built on the Rock, 116.

<sup>178</sup> Ylvisaker, *Our Twentieth Anniversary*, 282.

behind the back of the Wisconsin Synod, who was still looking to purchase the college.<sup>179</sup>

In his response to Ackermann, von Briesen remarks,

I have your letter. I have never heard of Rev. Gullixson and I am certain that since my recent trip to Mankato I have sent a telegram to no one. I have never written anyone that the deal was off except that on Thursday of this week I wrote...that I was sure that the Wisconsin Synod would not buy the property.

There is no question, however, that from the time of the prior meeting at Mankato (December 9, 1925) the Bethany College interests have in all fairness had a right to sell the property to anyone they wanted, It was merely an understanding I had with the attorney and Rev. Pieper that up to the time of the last meeting (April 8, 1926) that nay offer received from anyone else should be communicated to me and if possible we be given an opportunity to have the board of trustees act immediately. I do not feel that Bethany College was under any obligation to us after the date of the last meeting at Mankato as the unanimous action of the board of trustees could well be interpreted to mean that negotiations would be dropped.<sup>180</sup>

In order to pour oil on troubled waters, the Norwegian Synod magnanimously offered to sell the property to the Wisconsin Synod for the exact amount they had paid for it. A neutral committee of the Wisconsin Synod looked into the purchase of the college and declared that the Norwegian Synod had acted in good faith and wished God's blessings in this significant undertaking.<sup>181</sup> Ylvisaker remarked, "Let it be said that the Wisconsin Synod, since this decision of its committee, has remained a true and faithful friend of our school."<sup>182</sup>

The Wisconsin Synod men involved, especially Pieper and Kuhlow, were extremely grateful that the ELS took the action it did. Not only did the ELS provide some

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<sup>179</sup> Report to the stockholders, 27-28.

<sup>180</sup> Report to the stockholders, 27-28.

<sup>181</sup> Ylvisaker, *Our Twentieth Anniversary*, 282.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

return for the original and beleaguered stockholders of Bethany, but they had complete confidence that the ELS would reform Bethany along the true principles of Christian education,

We, the stockholders of Bethany College Incorporated, feel very grateful to the brethren of the Norwegian Synod for saving the school for the Lutheran Church of the Synodical Conference, and at the same time for saving the stockholders from a possible assessment instead of a dividend... Without a doubt, Bethany College is in strong hands, in hands of people who are one in purpose, to have a Synodical school governed by the spirit of Jesus Christ, where young Christians, boys and girls, are fitted to take leadership in their respective communities.<sup>183</sup>

### *The East Madison Case*

The city of Madison and its surrounding communities had a special place of reverence among the founders of the ELS. H.M. Tjernagel, in a 1937 opening address to the Norwegian Synod held in Madison, put it this way,

Do you not feel a certain thrill, tempered with awe, at standing on Wisconsin soil this day? It was Wisconsin soil that bore the great oak under which the first missionary to our pioneer fathers preached. It was Wisconsin's generous forests which gave logs to their cabins and to their churches. And in her bosom their bodies found rest when their life-work was done... But to be more specific, we are in the city of Madison, the "Gem of the West." The beginnings of our synod's work in this city were made more than eighty years ago. For many years, all synod roads lead to Madison. It was here our first theological seminary, the very citadel of our Church, was located.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Report to the stockholders, 29.

<sup>184</sup> H.M. Tjernagel, Presidential address given to the 19<sup>th</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, Madison, WI, June 10-16, 1937. <http://www.evangelicallutheransynod.org/publications/essays/presaddresses/1937> (accessed December 31, 2009.)

With such deep sentiments and historical ties, one cannot help but understand the feeling that the Madison area was the “turf” of the ELS. So, in 1925, when the Western Wisconsin District of the Wisconsin Synod started work in the cradle of the Norwegian Synod, without so much as a brotherly note of intention, a fire of protest was set off within the ELS.

The Wisconsin Synod never had a foothold in the Madison area before 1925, which is surprising given the strong Wisconsin Synod presence both to the east and west of Madison. To a certain extent, this can be attributed to the earlier regional ethnicity of the Madison area. But by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the demographic landscape of Madison was considerably different. Not only had many rural Wisconsin Synod people moved into Madison to find work, but the Wisconsin Synod was in the midst of their transition to English, thereby expanding the cultural audience among whom they worked. This same cultural transition was happening among the ELS. Since both synods were now preaching the gospel to those outside of their traditional cultural enclave, it was only a matter of time before an issue of “turf” would become a factor.

That clash came in the fall of 1925. The east side of Madison was booming. How many Wisconsin Synod parishioners had moved into town? Who else was looking to join a congregation? With this line of reasoning, Pastor Thurow of Sun Prairie decided to canvass the east end of Madison in the late summer and early fall of 1925.<sup>185</sup> There was just one hitch. The ELS’ Our Savior’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, with its pastor S.C. Ylvisaker, was in the midst of its own canvass of the east end.<sup>186</sup> They had gathered a

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<sup>185</sup> The congregation that would be eventually incorporated from this early group would be Eastside Lutheran Church, Madison, WI.

<sup>186</sup> The congregation that would eventually be incorporated from this canvass would be Holy Cross Evangelical Lutheran Church, the largest congregation in the ELS.

group in the same neighborhood. This outreach effort was also meeting with success - a great blessing to the fledgling synod who had suffered such great losses for their confessional stand.

According to the established practice of the Synodical Conference, whatever area in which a Synod had been historically working was that Synod's area of operation. If a different synod wanted to work in that area, then they were to contact the appropriate mission board and ask permission. This is not to say that permission would not be granted, but it was to make sure that a new synod entering the area would not be seen of as an opposition church but a sister congregation. The practice was developed to prevent just such turf wars.

Yet, Pastor Thurow had neglected the standard operating procedure. Whatever the reason behind Thurow's neglect to inform the ELS was, the Norwegians felt slighted. On September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1925, the ELS pastors in the Madison area made the Western Wisconsin District aware that Thurow had violated proper protocol in initiating the east side canvass. The Norwegians requested that before any further action was taken, there be a joint meeting between the Western Wisconsin Mission Board and Norwegian Synod.

What had been a slighting turned into a real wound in short order. Instead of securing a meeting with their ELS brethren, the District Mission Board (who by this time had taken over the project) pushed ahead with their plans. By October, a congregation had been organized. By November, they had called their first pastor, Gervasius Fischer. By December 6<sup>th</sup>, they were conducting their first services, acquired land and by February of 1926, would have their first chapel. The Wisconsin Synod had thrown their



weight around, intruded upon a very fertile mission field of the ELS, and failed to even hear the concerns of the local ELS pastors.

The local ELS pastors, S.C. Ylvisaker, C.A. Moldstad, and G.A. Gullixson, registered their complaint concerning this high handedness to the Western Wisconsin District Mission Board. Feelings had been hurt and people had been thrown into confusion. The land purchased for the East Side mission was located less than 5 blocks from the land purchased by the ELS for its group. Also, as later correspondence bears out, the Norwegians, still smarting from their courageous confessional stand, had their spirits raised by the blessing that God was showering on their work in east Madison. Simply turning this field over to the Wisconsin Synod seemed unfair to say the least.

Finally, a meeting was secured on December 3, 1925 at the Park Hotel in Madison, Wisconsin. In attendance were Pastors Ylvisaker, Moldstad, Gullixson and H.M. Tjernagel of the ELS; from the Wisconsin Synod were Pastor Julius Bergholz, the chairman of the mission board, District President Thurow, Pastor Abelmann, and Pastor Fischer.<sup>187</sup> While minutes were not kept for the meeting, the subsequent correspondence reveals that the Wisconsin Synod men completely misjudged the purpose of the meeting. The Wisconsin Synod men thought the meeting was to simply clarify the working relationship of sister synods in east Madison. The Norwegian men did not see this as appropriate. Until the chief matter of wrong done against them had been recognized by the Wisconsin Synod men and repented of, there would be no talk about dividing the

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<sup>187</sup> It is interesting that Tjernagel was at the meeting, given that he was not the president of the ELS at the time and his parish was in Iowa. The only feasible explanation for this seems to be that H.M. Tjernagel seemed to be better acquainted with the Wisconsin Synod than other men of his Synod. His son, Neelak, would graduate from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, WI, in 1932. Also, Tjernagel had served as missionary to the Stockbridge-Munsee Indians who had been relocated to a reservation in Gresham, WI, near Shawano, WI. Wisconsin Synod pastor Carl Guenther had preceded Tjernagel at this mission.

mission field in Madison. So troubled was Tjernagel that he spent the better part of his 6-hour train ride back to Lawler, IA composing a letter to Pastor Bergholz. His chief intent was getting the Wisconsin men to realize their wrong against his Synod.

Tjernagel's correspondence with Pastor Bergholz gives a glimpse into the wounded psyche of the pastors of the reorganized Norwegian Synod. The entire first page of the letter is spent trying to explain to Pastor Bergholz their sensitivity to Wisconsin's intrusion upon their historic mission field,

It may be that you can not fully understand my sensitiveness and that of my brethren in the Norwegian Synod on this point, you may be inclined to judge us as super-sensitive, yes, even tempted to suspicion it all as a subterfuge.<sup>188</sup>

But there is something else that worried Tjernagel. Do the Wisconsin men realize that such high-handed tactics, no matter how well intentioned, will be used to create a spirit of distrust among those who had lost so much in their confessional stand? Do they not realize that many Norwegian men might question, "If this is how my brother treats me, the enemy might be preferable!"

I believe I can include all of my Norwegian brethren and say "we" all bear wounds of conscience dating back to the tears before the Norwegian merger which are healed or only partly healed, according to the measure of faith in the forgiveness of sins through Christ our Savior as possessed by the Old Norwegian Synod... As I look back over the period of some 15 years before the lamentable merger of 1917 I can easily discern the lack of brotherly love as the poison gas that finally caused the fall of the brave regiment in God's army to which I belong...

I am frank and bold to state that the smell of that deadly gas is strong within the Synodical Conference.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> H.M. Tjernagel to Julius Bergholz, letter, December 3, 1925, ELS Presidential Files: 1920s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

Tjernagel contends vehemently that this matter is not simply a case of miscommunication. The Wisconsin men had erred against the Norwegian brothers working in that area by intruding in their field of labors without so much as a brotherly conversation. This error and its recognition was the primary concern of the Norwegian men. They wanted a public recognition that the Wisconsin men had erred in their practice. Until they receive this, any talk about practical matters must be put aside.

Tjernagel makes it clear that his goal is not to win a victory over Wisconsin, but “a victory over our common enemy, he who seeks to destroy our souls. For what are such troubles as have arisen between us brothers but the insidious machinations of our foxy foe, the devil?”<sup>190</sup> To further demonstrate this, Tjernagel, anticipating that the Western Wisconsin District would fully acknowledge their sin and repent, suggests that they take over the area completely, but as an English mission. Tjernagel’s generosity is evidence of his humility of spirit and his fervent desire to have good relations with his Wisconsin Synod brethren.<sup>191</sup>

Bergholz replied to Tjernagel in a letter dated December 7, 1925. In his response, Bergholz clearly shows he repents of the hurt that the Wisconsin Synod men had caused the Norwegian brethren. In his response to Tjernagel (which he also forwarded to Abelman and Thurow), Bergholz personally admits that the standard protocol had been violated. In addition, Bergholz shares the same worry that Tjernagel has about the Synodical Conference. But of more significance are his comments (in German) to

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ylvisaker to Tjernagel, letter, December 8, 1925, ELS Presidential Files: 1920s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN. Tjernagel’s suggestion was perhaps too much for the Norwegian pastors in Madison. Ylvisaker was uncomfortable with the offer to turn over work to the Wisconsin Synod. To him, such an offer seemed to be bargaining for the repentance of Wisconsin. Ylvisaker also did not believe that the suggestion of turning over the field to Wisconsin would be accepted by the members already gathered under his auspices.

Thurow and Abelmann, “Dear brother Thurow, it is true, the shortage of brotherly love and of unity in the Synodical Conference, yes, in our own Synod, is hazardous. I ask you here, that you, as I have attempted to do, examine and judge this matter without bitterness against them...in the light of God’s Word, from brotherly kindness and consideration.”<sup>192</sup> To Abelmann, Bergholz wrote, “May the Lord grant us true humility on our part to do all we possibly can to exercise and practice SEIN FLESSIG ZU HALTEN DIE EINIGKEIT IM GEISTE DURCH DAS BAND FRIEDENS.”<sup>193</sup>

With repentance gained from the Wisconsin Synod brethren, working arrangements were established in such a way that benefited both Eastside and Holy Cross in years to come. By 1942, Pastor Erling Ylvisaker of Holy Cross was directing all his parish’s children to Eastside.<sup>194</sup> By 1943, Eastside was the sight of a consolidated school of all the Synodical Conference parishes in the city of Madison. In addition to this, Eastside called two ELS school teachers, Miss Marjorie Lillegard (1944-49) and Miss Gundrun Madson (1949-1955), to teach the lower grades.<sup>195</sup>

While the event might not seem that important, it gives a clear indication of the early impressions and early inter-synodical relations of the two synods. First, Wisconsin men knew precious little about the history and mind-set of their sister synod. Granted, 1925 was well before the age of mass media, but the Synodical Conference was still a pretty small world. To further support this contention, it is clear from Tjernagel’s letter that he takes for granted that the Wisconsin men are ignorant about the tender conscience

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<sup>192</sup> Julius Bergholz to H.M. Tjernagel, letter, December 7, 1925, ELS Presidential Files: 1920s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Commemoration of 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Eastside Madison, booklet, Congregational History Files, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Mequon, WI. 12.

<sup>195</sup> 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Eastside Madison, 14.

of the ELS, as well as her wariness to make the same mistakes in the Synodical Conference that had been made in the Old Norwegian Synod.

The event also shows an initial lack of brotherly love on the part of the Wisconsin men. Not only did they enter into east Madison unannounced, but Bergholz's comment to Thurow and his quotation of Ephesians 4:3 to Abelmann are interesting. Why would such a reminder be necessary, unless Thurow and Abelmann, by their attitude and actions had acerbated an already tense situation? Even Bergholz's surprise and wonder at the emotional tone with which Tjernagel wrote to him adds to this understanding of the events. In short, there is a great difference between knowing about someone and knowing someone. These early faux pas were the result of strangers getting to know one another.

Yet this situation was also filled with pleasant surprise. On the one hand, the ELS was preparing for a fight that never came. Much to their joy, their rebuke was heeded and a God-pleasing resolution to the situation was found. Bergholz's letter, which includes his gentle rebuke of Abelmann and Thurow, show a tremendous amount of graciousness as well as humility. There is more than a gentlemanly politeness here. There is recognition that they have hurt their sister synod and they seek to follow Matthew 5 and Matthew 18 in healing the breach. In addition, the east Madison matter shows a common consciousness already in the 1920s of a foreign spirit filling the Synodical Conference. Both in Tjernagel's letter to Bergholz and Bergholz's comments to Thurow, they recognize the importance of not letting the practical work and the visible success trump the clear teachings of Scripture and their application.

Finally, this matter shows that both the Wisconsin Synod and the ELS were trying to work their way through a time of cultural and language transition. Tjernagel has no

objection to the Wisconsin Synod doing English work in the area, for both Norwegian and German can find nurture in a common language. But a German-English mission would cause many Norwegians to stay away. If the Wisconsin Synod made this concession, then the Norwegians would politely bow out from the area.<sup>196</sup> In some ways, the transition to English brought the synods closer together.

In summary, this case is but a snapshot of the sometimes awkward impressions that the two synods left with each other during their early intersynodical dealings. The awkwardness confirms the cultural differences and the fraternal distance that the two initially had with each other. Thankfully, both synods worked through their first impressions to find a unity of spirit.

### III. The Intersynodical Theses (1915-1929)

The story of the Intersynodical Theses is one that is always told by Wisconsin Synod historians with a sense of disappointment. One can agree to a point with E.C. Fredrich that the Intersynodical Theses were “the last viable effort to enlarge the sway of the Synodical Conference.”<sup>197</sup> The Theses, nonetheless, were a failure. Yet that failure had the unexpected side effect of closer relations between the Wisconsin Synod and the ELS.

While the Madison Agreement had been officially rejected by the Synodical Conference already in 1912, some pastors in Sibley County, MN thought that the document was a good starting point to begin discussions among the Ohio, Iowa, Missouri and Wisconsin Synods. After a number of meetings in Gaylord (Sibley County) and St.

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<sup>196</sup> Tjernagel to Berholz, December 5, 1925.

<sup>197</sup> Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 179.

Paul, MN the possibility Ohio and Iowa joining the Synodical Conference looked like more and more like a genuine reality. By 1917, the Missouri, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Iowa Synods (the Buffalo Synod joining later) had turned the unofficial action into an official board that would meet for the next 12 years to resolve the theological differences that had separated them.

But there was a problem with the procedure that had spawned these various sets of theses. First, using the Madison Settlement as a basis for discussion was a bad idea. It was a unionistic document created by a unionistic procedure. The Madison Settlement had been produced only one year after previous union committees had declared that they had come to an impasse. Yet, after the appointment of new committee members, and in the miraculously short span of a year, the Madison Settlement claimed all past differences now settled.

This should have raised red flags to say the least. Rather than real resolution, the document was a cleverly-worded compromise fueled political and cultural pressures to form a single Norwegian Lutheran church body in America. O.K. Teisberg gives this insightful anecdote about some of the pressure tactics used and double talk employed by the Madison Settlement's chief architect, H.G. Stub,

During the Synod meeting at Sioux Falls, 1914, Dr. Stub stopped me on the street...and said to me I now must be a good boy and vote for union. I must not be stubborn as before. I then asked him, "Are the church bodies now united in faith?" He answered, "Yes." I then asked him if he himself had changed position in doctrine...to this he answered, "No." I further asked him if the United Church had changed its standpoint. To this he answered the United Church stood on the same point as before. I asked him, then, how he could say that there was unity in doctrine?

...to this Dr. Stub answered that all must be forgotten and stricken out.<sup>198</sup>

In formulating the Madison Settlement, the historical and theological context of the Election Controversy had been purposely ignored instead of addressed.

Finally, the discussion that produced the Madison Agreement was held within a fraternal atmosphere that already assumed fellowship had been established. All that was left was to find the right words. Clifford Nelson records the following insightful anecdote from one of the union meetings that produced the Madison Settlement,

Rasmus Malmin of the Synod committee informed the writer that a thirty-six-year-old pastor and college president at Forest City, Iowa, by the name of L.W. Boe busied himself at this juncture [just before the first meeting of the new Joint Committee in November, 1911] to press upon leading members of the two committees the necessity of getting acquainted with each other...to illustrate the spirit of *Gemutlichkeit* present from the outset, one of the committee members told the writer that 'we ate and we drank together.' Expressing surprise from the latter, the writer was told that some of the committee met at a German restaurant called "Max's Café." When the formal sessions adjourned, one member might say to his friend, 'Quo Vadis?' To this the answer was given, 'Ad Max.' With that the informal sessions began."<sup>199</sup>

From such a flawed process, one could hardly trust the reliability of the document that was produced or the unity that was claimed to have been reached. What has not been recognized, even by Wisconsin historians E.C. Fredrich and Armin Schuetze, is the extent to which the Intersynodical Theses suffered from the same procedural and theological flaws. Had the Intersynodical Theses carried the day they would have been tantamount to a second Madison Settlement.

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<sup>198</sup> S.C. Ylvisaker, "The National Lutheran Council." Paper presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN, 1920. 63

<sup>199</sup> Aaberg, *City Set on a Hill*, 197.



Take for instance the procedure adopted for the meetings that produced the Sibley County Theses. There was a conscious effort to avoid discussing the *Status Controversae*. Instead, they started with the Madison Settlement as a basis for beginning.<sup>200</sup> Secondly, when the Theses were taken to St. Paul for discussion in the same year, professors were not allowed to speak. Perhaps this procedure did allow more free discussion among pastors, but the very act to silence those who in all likelihood could not only ask the right questions but give important theological and historical insight, shows a bow to pragmatic procedure and church politics over a real desire to get at the truth,

The movement began in opposition to the theological professors. This antagonism must have been building since the 1903-1906 talks. And at a cursory glance one might feel that the pastors accomplished more in a few months than professors and Synodical officials had accomplished in years... However, a closer analysis of the document... reveals problems and inconsistencies. In addition, the writers of *Zur Einigung* indicate that since all the participants recognize article 11 of the Formula of Concord, there was no need to set forth further statements of doctrine.<sup>201</sup>

There were more signs of trouble during the years of discussion. First, there was Iowa's waxing and waning on the doctrine of Scripture. Some corners of the Iowa Synod were uncomfortable with the traditional Lutheran understanding of verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture. The issue came to a head when Iowa insisted that the word "inerrant" be stricken from the proposed article of verbal inspiration in their merger discussion with Buffalo and Ohio.

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<sup>200</sup> Armin Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference: Ecumenical Endeavor* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000), 194.

<sup>201</sup> John Wohlrabe, "Zur Einigung: The St. Paul Theses – a document study," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (Fall 1983), 139.

J.P. Meyer makes note of this development in the 1926 *Quartalschrift*. Meyer asks, “Can it be possible that the Iowa Synod, by demanding the change, is trying to give shelter to the opinion which, though accepting in a general way the canonical books of both Testaments as the Word of God and as the infallible source, norm, and guide in all matters pertaining to Christian faith and conduct, yet...dares to doubt the absolute inerrancy of the Scriptures in all its statements.”<sup>202</sup> Meyer asks the right questions, but then prevents any suspicion from falling on the soundness of the Intersynodical Theses statement on Scripture,

Unless we are convinced by irrefutable proof, we will not believe it (Iowa not holding to the same definition of verbal inspiration), especially in view of the following thesis on the authority of the Scriptures adopted by the Intersynodical Committee of the Synodical Conference and the Synods of Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo: “*Der Modernen Theologie gegenueber halten wir nach wie vor fest an der Lehre von der Verbalinspiration. Wir glauben und bekennen, das die Schrift nicht bloss keinerlei Irrtuemer oder Widersprueche darin finden.*” This thesis was subscribed to wholeheartedly and without any reservation by the Iowa delegation to the Intersynodical committee.<sup>203</sup>

Why does Meyer bend over backwards to defend Iowa? Could it be that laboring for 6 years with representatives had caused him to feel fraternal warmth to the representatives of these synods, thus losing critical perspective? Meyer himself admits as much a decade later when reviewing a book entitles *Historical Open Questions among American Lutherans*,

The undersigned, as stated before, shares the responsibility for the formulation of the Chicago Theses, and it is not a pleasant thing to admit that they are unsatisfactory, or worse. But on rereading them after eight years since the last

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<sup>202</sup> John P. Meyer, “Ohio-Iowa-Buffalo Merger Postponed” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 23, 4 (Fall 1926), 281-282.

<sup>203</sup> John P. Meyer, *Ohio-Iowa-Buffalo Merger Postponed* 282.

meeting has lapsed, I am forced in the interest of the truth to express my agreement with the above verdict of Rev. Hanssen [“Ambiguous and hazy...it is possible to read into their wording either the doctrinal conception of the Synodical Conference or the opposing conception of the ALC. And just for that reason they were and still are unacceptable to the synods of the Synodical Conference.”] The subject matter of these theses having been thoroughly discussed in several meetings of the committee and the Scripture truths having been established in the discussions, the representatives of the Synodical Conference found these very truths expressed in the proposed theses. In the light of the satisfactory oral discussions they seemed to be plain statements of the truth and entirely universal. To an outsider, who did not take part in the discussions, however, the ambiguities that nevertheless crept into the phraseology are naturally more easy to detect.<sup>204</sup>

What is even more amazing is that in the very same issue of *Quartalschrift*, Meyer reports as well about the Minneapolis Theses, which established full altar and pulpit fellowship between Iowa, Buffalo and the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The very fact that Meyer confesses he was caught off guard by the announcement of the Minneapolis Theses shows again that Wisconsin and Missouri were unwittingly participating with church bodies that had a dual agenda. Even when they did recognize the dual agenda, they seemed unwilling to deal with the theological and practical ramifications.

The pleas of the “minority” if the Norwegian Synod, who, for conscience sake could not enter into the proposed union...were ignored, the members of the “minority,” both pastors and congregations were ruthlessly forced out of the synod, and have since been repeatedly molested in their peaceful church work. The wrong perpetrated by the former Norwegian Synod on the “minority” must certainly be righted before any church fellowshiping with the Norwegian Lutheran Church can find God’s approval. Are

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<sup>204</sup> E.C. Fredrich, “Wisconsin Inter-Church Relations in the First Third of this Century.” Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary On-line Essay File. <http://www.wlssays.net/files/FredrichCentury.pdf> (Last accessed July 19, 2010).

the synods of Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo not aware of this unbrotherly and highly offensive treatment accorded the minority? Or do they, by entering into negotiations for church-fellowship with the Norwegian Lutheran Church, practically admit the correctness of the definition given by Dr. Melhorn of the purpose of their own proposed merger?<sup>205</sup>

It is true that the Norwegian Synod suffered many slights, insults and personal losses at the hands of the ELC for their courageous doctrinal stand. But Meyer's call to correct the offensive treatment of the minority seems to miss the main point. The ELC holds to false doctrine concerning the doctrine of election. How can we trust the progress of the Intersynodical Theses in these chief areas if both Iowa and Ohio are willing to join hands with those who hold the opposite position? Meyer does not address this.

Even the final set of theses, as well written as they were, contained a red flag. Two of the Ohio Synod members of the Intersynodical Committee had made a special declaration in connection with the doctrine of election. They declared that they could not say "that the so-called second form of the doctrine which had been used by the Lutheran church for more than 300 years gives expression to another doctrine."<sup>206</sup> Shadows of a second Opgjor were being cast.

And how did the ELS feel about the ominous shadow the Intersynodical Theses were casting over the Synodical Conference? There is a telling personal letter between two ELS pastors, J.E. Thoen and G.A. Gullixson, dated February 5, 1926. In it Thoen expresses his doubts about the outcome of the Intersynodical Theses, but also an alarming optimism he sees in especially the Missouri men at these meetings,

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<sup>205</sup> John P. Meyer, "What is the Purpose of Organizing the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of North America" *Theologische Quartalschrift* 23, 4 (Fall 1926), 285.

<sup>206</sup> Schuetze, *Synodical Conference*, 201.

Dear Gullixson!

I had just sat down to write you concerning the conference when I received a letter from Anderson concerning the meeting of the mixed conference at Minneapolis on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. He tells me that there will be a discussion on the Intersynodical Theses and urges me to attend. I have written him and assured him that I shall be there....

I hope you can come to the meeting in St. Paul the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. We must do all we can to prevent any kind of compromise. I cannot feel full confidence in our Missouri brethren who are so enthusiastic for these colloquiums. They do not realize the dangers I am afraid.

With best regards,  
J.E. Thoen<sup>207</sup>

The ELS, since the disastrous Madison Settlement, had recognized the new spirit of modern union discussion from the ones of generations past. That new spirit did not seek to fit men to the Word of God, but rather make the Word of God fit men. Their still fresh wounds made them alert watchmen, constantly on the look out for other “Settlements” which threatened to further weaken the confessional consciousness of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church.

The ELS knew that the Intersynodical Theses would lead the Synodical Conference further down the road of false ecumenism and deterioration of doctrine. They had seen what the Madison Settlement had done to the ELC. Less than a year after the merger, the pan- Lutheran National Lutheran Council was formed with H.G. Stub as its president and Lauritz Larsen as its secretary. This development did not escape the notice of the ELS,

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<sup>207</sup> J. Thoen to George Gullixson, letter, February 6, 1926, ELS Presidential Files: 1920s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

The Council may fitly be characterized as a blunder and a calamity.

A blunder, for the opportune moment was at hand but it was misused. For what hinders co-operation among the Lutheran bodies in this country, even in externals? The opponents of Missouri have made much of the fact that the original regulations of the Council were drawn up by a Missourian – how unreasonable she must be when she now refuses to cooperate! The pity is that those who have been misled to adopt unionistic principles are unable anymore to distinguish clearly between externals and internal...

A calamity, for through the organization and work of the National Lutheran Council the floodgates of unionism and lodgery have been opened still wider and further sections of the Lutheran Church are being subjected to their destroying power. It also seeks to reconstruct, to build up, in one part, but destroys in another; it seeks to unite, but has caused further strife and dissension; it seeks to save Lutheranism in America and Europe, but is robbing it of its real strength and making it an easy prey to the spirit of the Reformed Churches. The National Lutheran Council has brought a crisis in the history of the Lutheran Church in America. May God in his grace keep us firm.<sup>208</sup>

ELS pastor J. Hendricks gave a scathing critique of the National Lutheran Council's biblical hermeneutics. He remarks how the paragraph of Council's constitution dealing with Scripture is too vague, too indefinite. In fact, Hendricks goes on to say, there is no clear statement about Scripture and its use.

A general statement is made in this paragraph which all Protestants agree on, but which does not exclude the modern theory of inspiration...<sup>209</sup>

The Old Synod taught in regard to inspiration that the sacred writers were organs of God, so that what they taught, God taught. The Spirit in a miraculous manner gave

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<sup>208</sup> Ylvisaker, *The National Lutheran Council*, 80.

<sup>209</sup> J. Hendricks. "The Doctrinal Position of The National Lutheran Council" Paper presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN, 1920. 81.

to them what they should speak and write, the very words they should use.

We fail to find this definite doctrine of inspiration in this paragraph. On the other hand, we find a doctrine set forth in such a general manner, a doctrine so broad that the modern theory of inspiration may easily find its way into the paragraph.<sup>210</sup>

Hendricks poses a poignant question to his former co-workers who were leading their charges so far away from the moorings of Scripture,

How Dr. H.G. Stub and the Norwegian Lutheran Church could feel justified in thanking God for the unity in faith and church practice with these Eastern Lutheran Synods, we fail to see, but we see clearly that the Lutheran faith has suffered terribly in the past by attempts of union and cooperation with various Christian denominations and tendencies. This unionistic spirit has penetrated the heart and the soul of a large part of the Lutheran Church and it has poisoned its life roots.<sup>211</sup>

The ELS men were sounding a loud warning to the rest of the Synodical Conference Lutherans - don't fool around with such people, they have a different spirit! And such a warning had direct implications for the Intersynodical Theses because Iowa, Ohio, and Buffalo were members of the National Lutheran Council! No wonder Thoen was worried about the Intersynodical Theses. No wonder Christian Anderson, then president of the ELS, was urging as many of his small number to attend these conferences to argue against such associations. Missouri, their dear sister, as well as Wisconsin, were going down the same rosy path to ruin so many of their former brothers and sisters in the faith had gone down in the Madison Settlement.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, the Synodical Conference was saved from the doom foreshadowed by the Intersynodical Theses. The Missouri Synod, perhaps in her last

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<sup>210</sup> Hendricks, *The Doctrinal Position of the National Lutheran Council*, 83.

<sup>211</sup> Hendricks, *The Doctrinal Position of the National Lutheran Council*, 90.

great contribution to the Synodical Conference, rose up and rejected the Intersynodical Theses as inadequate. At their 1929 River Forest Convention, they gave the following reasons for their rejections: “a) because many serious objections have been raised by members of the Synod, which, in our opinion, should be carefully considered and eventually be taken into account in any further work concerning these theses; b) because the omission of historical data in working out these theses was evidently not conducive to a full understanding on the part of the colloquents. We must begin with the status controversae.”<sup>212</sup>

This action torpedoed any further developments of the Intersynodical Theses. Wisconsin could do little to revive them, and, with the Protestant controversy in full swing, their attentions turned to their own backyard and away from the wider Lutheran scene.<sup>213</sup> Iowa and Ohio did not act on them, and Buffalo’s acceptance meant very little.<sup>214</sup> Wisconsin and Missouri entered into the Intersynodical Theses with the hope of bringing Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo into the Synodical Conference. What had happened instead was the Synodical Conference being pulled, ever so subtly, away from its doctrinal moorings. S.C. Ylvisaker gave this accurate critique of the Theses,

There was no sufficient safeguard against the old errors of the Iowa Synod about the visible side of the invisible Church, the Antichrist, Chiliasm, the Sunday, and their peculiar doctrine of the Ministry. The committee which had been appointed to review these theses considered it “a hopeless undertaking to make these theses unobjectionable from the point of view of pure doctrine. It would be better to discard them as a failure.” The same examining committee also reported: “It now seems to your committee a matter of wisdom to desist from intersynodical

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<sup>212</sup> S.C. Ylvisaker, “In the Interest of Truth” *Lutheran Sentinel* 26, 16 (August 27, 1943), 245.

<sup>213</sup> Richard P. Stevens, “The Chicago Theses – Promised Much, Produced Little!” WLS Essay File EF1738. 1972.

<sup>214</sup> Schuetze, *Synodical Conference*, 205.



conferences. By entering into a relationship with the adherents of the Norwegian Opgjor, the opponents have given evidence that they do not hold our position in the doctrine of conversion and election. In view of this fact, further conferences would be useless.”<sup>215</sup>

But how influenced had the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods been by the ELS’ warning?

The Wisconsin Synod seems to have listened. First, there is a clearer understanding that there was a different spirit in Ohio, Iowa and Buffalo, the spirit against which the ELS had been warning the Synodical Conference. While the Wisconsin men still vigorously held to a total agreement in doctrine, both fundamentals and non-fundamentals, Iowa and Ohio, by their double dealing with the ELC, had shown that “total doctrinal agreement” meant for them something different. This mistrust of union discussions, as will be seen in chapter 2, is firmly rooted in the minds of WELS men from this point on.

There is more direct evidence that the Wisconsin Synod heeded more closely her little sister’s objections. For instance, in an article written by Karl Plocher for the *Northwestern Lutheran*, he cites one of the major reasons for lack of closer fellowship with the ALC is their association with the ELC, which was still saddled with the compromising Madison Settlement, which spoke unclearly regarding the doctrine of conversion.<sup>216</sup> And even more direct proof that the WELS was listening to her sister was fact that the *Northwestern Lutheran* reprinted a long article by George Lillegard of the ELS, which challenged many of the assumptions that smaller churches who did not join in merger declined in number.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>215</sup>Ylvisaker, *In the Interest of Truth*, 246.

<sup>216</sup> Mark Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2002), 143.

<sup>217</sup> Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods*, 144.

It is clear that the Wisconsin heeded her sister's warning, and she would stick to her hermeneutical guns during the next round of union talks starting in the mid-1930s. Even J.P. Meyer shows a greater clarity in delineating the issues in 1935 than he did a decade earlier when he writes,

To our way of looking at it, church fellowship will take care of itself once the unity of faith and confession is achieved; and to stress, even to mention union as the aim to be achieved cannot but have detrimental repercussions.<sup>218</sup>

The failure of the Intersynodical Theses united the ELS and the Wisconsin Synod with a shared experience. That experience would help build understanding and trust between the Wisconsin Synod and the ELS that would prove invaluable in the coming decades of Synodical Conference strife.

Yet the rejection of the theses would not sit as well with Missouri in years to come. There were many in the Missouri Synod who were greatly upset and disappointed that the Intersynodical Theses were not accepted. Theodore Graebner insisted that the theses were perfectly sound and due to a spirit of mistrust in the Missouri Synod they were rejected.<sup>219</sup> Missouri's union discussions with the ALC just a few years later shows that the bold and correct action taken at the 1929 River Forest convention failed to quash the desire among many within the LCMS for closer union with the ALC. The subsequent effect of the failed theses signaled a strengthening of ties between the Wisconsin and ELS, while a weakening of ties between them and the LCMS.

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<sup>218</sup> Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods*, 146.

<sup>219</sup> Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods*, 129.

## Chapter 2

### Relations confirmed and strengthened (1935-1955)

#### I. A United Reply to the ULC; a united rejection of LCMS-ALC discussions ('35-'38)

1935 was a year of union overtures. First, there was the call for increased cooperation between all synods by Fredrick Knubel of the United Lutheran Church. Second, there was the invitation made by the ALC to the LCMS for renewed fellowship discussions. It was also a year that saw an increase of inter-synodical communication between the ELS and WELS due to their common rejection of Knubel's call for cooperation and their common concern of the LCMS' renewed discussions with the ALC.

#### *United Rejection of ULCA's Call for Cooperation*

The WELS and ELS stood on common ground in their rejection of the ULCA's call for cooperation. But what is not so well known is the extent to which the two synods coordinated their answer to the ULCA. President Brenner of the Wisconsin Synod tasked Pastor Edmund Reim to formulate a reply to the ULCA.<sup>220</sup> In preparing the WELS reply, Pastor Reim reached out to Pastor George Lillegard of the ELS. On March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1935, Pastor Edmund Reim, wrote the following to Pastor George Lillegard, then secretary of the ELS,

Dear Pastor Lillegard,

Rev. John Brenner, President of our Joint Synod of Wisconsin, has delegated to me the drafting of a reply that our Synod shall make at the time of its convention next

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<sup>220</sup> Pastor Reim served St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Mount Calvary, WI, and would later be called to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary as its president. He would leave the WELS to found the Church of the Lutheran Confession for conscience sake. He was assisted in 1935 by Pastor Harold Kleinhans of Martin Luther Evangelical Lutheran Church, Oshkosh, WI and Pastor J. Schultz, another pastor from the Oshkosh area.

August to the invitation coming from the United Lutheran Church through its President, Dr. Knubel, looking forward to greater affiliation between the various Lutheran bodies of America.

I understand that your synod has already formulated its reply to this same invitation. If my information is correct, would you be so kind as to send me a copy? I am sure that you will recognize my purpose: the greatest degree of cooperation between our respective synods.

Fraternally yours,

Edmund C. Reim  
Calvary, WI<sup>221</sup>

Beneath the letter was the hand written note, "Thank you". This request was gratefully responded to by Lillegard just a few days later, in which he writes,

Dear Brother Reim: -

Your letter of the 14<sup>th</sup>, asking if our Synod has formulated a reply to the invitation by Dr. Knubel to plan a union of all Lutherans, is at hand. I for my part appreciate very much your desire to have our Syn. Con. Synods co-operate as much as possible in answering that invitation. – and I am sure I am speaking also for our Synod as a whole in that.

Our Synod has not taken official action on Dr. Knubel's invitation, nor do I know that our officers have drafted any reply. It may be, however, that our acting President would know more about that; so I am sending him a copy of this letter and asking him to inform you if any reply has been sent. Our Synod has repeatedly warned against the unionistic movements that are being so busily agitated today, and articles have been written in our "Lutheran Sentinel" which deals more or less directly with the present move toward union, I am sending you some copies of our Luth. Sentinel in which such articles appear.

The only official action which our Synod has taken was last summer in connection with the resolution on Church Unity

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<sup>221</sup> Edmund Reim to George Lillegard, letter, March 14, 1935, ELS Presidential files: 1930s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

sent out by a Chicago group, I shall quote that here, as its contents may be of some interest to you.<sup>222</sup>

Lillegard goes on to share the official reply to Knubel and the ULCA.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Lillegard to Reim, letter, March 20, 1935, ELS Presidential files: 1930s, Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>223</sup> Lillegard to Reim; The ELS resolution which was sent to the ULCA and later passed on to Edmund Reim, was as follows:

President Knubel:

We acknowledge the receipt of the same [ULCA] invitation with thanks and appreciate your good intentions. However, we have no reason to hope for much blessing from the contemplated move, in view of the fact that the official organs of the various Lutheran Church bodies afford sufficient evidence that they are not in all essentials one in doctrine. We enclosed a copy of resolutions passed at our last conventions in June 1934, addressed to Mr. Paulus List of Chicago. This will indicate the stand of our Synod in this Union Movement. With kind greetings,

C.A. Moldstad, Acting President

The resolutions on Church Unity sent to our annual convention, have been received and read before the Synod assembled. But in view of the fact that your so-called unity is not the expression of God-pleasing 'oneness in Christ,' but rather a man-made union which permits and fosters fellowship with those who openly flaunt the doctrines of Christ (we refer in particular to the address delivered by one of your members at the Century of Progress Hall of Religion, when it was dedicated last year) we cannot enter into any fraternal relationship with you. But we would plead with you, on the basis of God's inviolable Word, that you give diligent heed to that Word of truth which admonishes all who would be disciples of our blessed Savior: - 'Mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; avoid them.' Rom.16.17. The union which alone will find pleasing favor with God is that unity which is 'perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.' I Corinthians 1:10. Even a casual perusal of the official organs of the various Lutheran Church bodies will afford sufficient evidence that no one can truthfully say: - 'the different Lutheran bodies in America, in all essentials, are one in doctrine.'

May God spare us from ever giving the right hand of fellowship to those who will make the words of Dr. Joshua Oden, in the Hall of Religion address, their own.

'Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.' Proverbs 27:6

On behalf of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, in convention assembled at Mankato, MN, June 6-12. (Adopted)

In his concluding remarks to Reim, Lillegard goes on to say, “May God grant that all our Synodical Conference churches will stand together, on the basis of God’s unadulterated Word, against the liberal, unionistic “Lutheranism” that has in recent years done so much damage to our American Lutheran Zion.”<sup>224</sup> The reply that was later crafted by the WELS would be more refined and detailed than the ELS refusal, but it basically voices the same objections. A closer examination of the reply shows that the Wisconsin men included much of the same argumentation as their ELS brothers as well as citing the same Scriptural passages.<sup>225</sup>

*Common stance against LCMS-ALC fellowship discussions*

The responses of both the WELS and ELS to the ULCA were appropriate and bold. They certainly show a shared confessional position. But what is of more interest than their common rejections of the ULCA “Open Invitation” was their mutual snub by the ALC in its invitation for union talks with Missouri. Why were the WELS and ELS left out of the discussions? Was it merely an oversight? This hardly seems possible given Wisconsin’s active part in the Intersynodical Theses. Did the ALC recognize that there was a difference in the theological climate of the two smaller synods than in the Missouri Synod? Mark Braun gives the following analysis of the ALC snub of Wisconsin,

Soon, however, Wisconsin learned more about its “non-invitation” to these meetings. “For years it seemed as though this had been an unintentional oversight, or perhaps the result of a letter being lost in the mails, and we took it as such.” But in a passing remark, the ALC’s Michael Reu wondered in 1941, “whether perhaps our church did not

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<sup>224</sup> Lillegard to Reim.

<sup>225</sup> ULCA 1936 proceedings, page 399-400. The following similarities are to be noted. 1) The similar use and citation of I Corinthians 1:10; 2) the unionistic practices of the ULCA; 3) the identification of the liberal spirit.

have good reasons to refrain for extending an invitation to Missouri's sister synods in its union negotiations." Perhaps even stronger reasons" existed in 1941 than in 1935 or 1938 to "make such an invitation even more difficult." Reu's remark suggested that Wisconsin's failure to be invited to the union discussions "was not so innocent as we in our good nature have assumed."<sup>226</sup>

Similarly, the strain between the Norwegian-Missouri "Jonathan-David" like relationship had already been felt in the early 30s. One such issue was the "Term-Question," which debated the correct term that should be used to translate "God" in Chinese. The ELS missionary in China, George Lillegard, along with other members of the ELS Committee on Foreign Missions, stated that it was un-Scriptural and fraught with almost insuperable and practical difficulties to use the proper name of a heathen idol to designate the true God in translating and in printing sermons, tracts, etc., as well as in the preaching of the Gospel on the whole.<sup>227</sup> However, the LCMS Board for foreign missions, as well as the Concordia Theological Seminary faculty in St. Louis, upheld the use of the idol's name to designate the true God.<sup>228</sup>

The strife over this question led to Lillegard returning from the China mission in 1927. The debate continued officially until 1936, but it was never resolved to the satisfaction of the ELS. When one couples the "Term-Question" debate with the flurry of ELS essays against the American Lutheran Conference, the National Lutheran Council, their public protestations of the Intersynodical Theses, and their rather sharp rejection of the ULCA's "Open Invitation," one is hardly surprised that the ELS was snubbed by the ALC. S.C. Ylvisaker's put his own take on the ELS' non-invitation to the ALC-LCMS talks this way,

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<sup>226</sup> Braun, *Tale of Two Synods*, 153-154.

<sup>227</sup> Aaberg, *City Set on a Hill*, 84.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

As for sitting on the joint meetings of the synods concerned, we have, in the first place, not been invited to take part in these meetings until two years ago, in 1941, when a resolution of the Missouri Synod included this plan of asking the sister synods to be represented as well, a plan that was quickly questioned in the circles of the American Lutheran Church and would hardly have been carried out because of the unwillingness of members of the American Lutheran Church to accept our committee as partners in the discussion.<sup>229</sup>

The non-invitation of the WELS and the ELS demonstrates the theological unity of the two synods in comparison to the rapidly eroding confessional position of the LCMS. Further proof of this theological closeness can be found when one compares H.M. Tjernagel's 1936 ELS convention essay "Unity, Union, and Unionism" with Edmund Reim's 1935 WELS convention essay "Church Fellowship and Its Implications." These essays exhibit the striking similarities of each Synod's approach to Scripture as well as true church union. The most striking similarity between these two essays is how both Reim and Tjernagel diagnose a false spirit of unionism – a spirit which is more concerned about visible unity than it is about the truth. Compare Reim's assessment of the Lutheran scene with Tjernagel's.

Reim: The entire undertaking (the Intersynodical Theses) to which so much time and thought had been given was nullified when in 1930 the Ohio and Iowa Synods, which by that time had united with Buffalo to form the ALC, established fellowship with the Norwegian Merger, which on its part had ruthlessly overridden the conscientious objections of the minority...on the same doctrine of conversion and election.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> S.C. Ylvisaker, "Lutheran Witness's Review of *Grace for Grace*" *Lutheran Sentinel* 27, no.5 (March 13, 1944), 69-70.

<sup>230</sup> Edmund Reim, "Church Fellowship and Its Implications," Paper presented to the 23rd Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, August 7-13, 1935, New Ulm, MN, 41.



Tjernagel: Today conditions have become quite well settled, so that there can be little excuse for not knowing the spirit which prevails in the various Lutheran synods...At the present time there is also little excuse for any Lutheran synod to continue in error through ignorance...All possible encouragement has hereby been given to those in error to examine carefully their doctrine and practice in the light of God's Word. If they still persist in their error, they are without excuse.<sup>231</sup>

It is interesting also that the central theme of both Tjernagel's and Reim's address is the interconnectedness of the doctrine of Scripture and the practice of church fellowship. This point, that church fellowship must result from unity of doctrine and practice, and must never precede it, is what would set the WELS and the ELS apart from the other members of the Synodical Conference in years to come.

Further evidence of the strong fraternal respect each synod had for the other is seen in the correspondence between President John Brenner of the WELS and President Henry Ingebritson of the ELS during the late 30s and early 40s. In January of 1939, Ingebritson wrote to Brenner in regard to their protests against the Missouri-ALC dialog as well as the recent invitation both is synod and the WELS received from President Behnken of the LCMS to now take part. In the letter, Ingebritson expresses his thanks at the shared stand the Wisconsin Synod had taken with them against unionism and asks Brenner how their two synods might coordinate their efforts in admonishing the Missouri Synod,

We see great danger threatening conservative Lutheranism in the stand that our brethren (at least some of them) in the Missouri Synod take at the present time and are happy to know that we may look to the Wisconsin Synod to fight the liberal tendencies gaining ground.

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<sup>231</sup> H.M. Tjernagel, "Unity, Union, and Unionism," *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 43, no.2&3 (June/September 2002), 216.

It is of my opinion that the committee of your honorable body and that our synod ought to meet to get together in the near future.<sup>232</sup>

In his response to Ingebritson, Brenner explains why the Wisconsin Synod did not first make the offer of getting together with the ELS for discussion and consultation on how to address Missouri's errors. He goes on to welcome Ingebritson's suggestion of a joint WELS-ELS meeting,

A meeting of our two committees had been spoken of also among us, but there was a feeling that such a meeting might possibly create the impression that we are carrying on an agitation behind the backs of the Missouri brethren...

...since the Missouri Synod dealt with outsiders and adopted resolutions without having first consulted the other members of the Synodical Conference, it now appears to me entirely proper that we get working together.<sup>233</sup>

The critique of the ALC-LCMS union negotiations by the WELS/ELS came at the 1940 Synodical Conference Convention in Chicago, IL. Both synods had previously discussed many of the problems of the ALC-LCMS negotiations with their respective church bodies and had given decisive testimony that the ALC, contrary to the assurances of the Missouri Synod, was still holding to error.<sup>234</sup> This was evidenced by the ALC's 1938 Sandusky Resolution and the 1940 Pittsburg Agreement between the ULCA and the ALC.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>232</sup>Henry Ingebritson to John Brenner, letter, January 11, 1939, The John Brenner Collection, file #173. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mequon, WI.

<sup>233</sup>John Brenner to Henry Ingebritson, letter, January 30, 1939, The John Brenner Collection, file #173. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mequon, WI.

<sup>234</sup>Scheutze, *Synodical Conference*, 276.

<sup>235</sup>Aaberg, *City Set on a Hill*, 142-143. The Sandusky Resolution declared that it was impossible and unnecessary to be in complete agreement in doctrine and practice in order for fellowship to be established and that agreement only in the "fundamental" doctrines of Scripture was required. The Pittsburg Agreement undercut the doctrine of verbal, plenary inspiration.

At the Synodical Conference convention in Chicago, the two synods stood together. In a resolution drafted to address the ALC-LCMS negotiations, the floor committee asked that the negotiations be postponed until the matters objected to by the other members of the Synodical Conference could be addressed.<sup>236</sup> At its 1941 Fort Wayne Convention, the Missouri Synod voted to continue negotiations with the ALC, thus disagreeing with both the Wisconsin Synod and ELS' evaluation of the situation.<sup>237</sup> In a letter to Brenner in the fall of 1941, Ingebritson again shows his dismay at events in Missouri. He ponders where his synod and the Wisconsin Synod are to go from here in dealing with Missouri,

The ULC and the ALC are certainly acting on the encouragement given by the Fort Wayne resolutions in union matters. In authentic announcements in "Skandinavia" the Norwegian Merger announces that pastors of the ALC, Missouri Synod and the ULC are to have joint meetings in a number of given places. In the "Bond" we get this, "A series of conferences designed to improve relationships among Lutheran groups in America is being planned by special committee of the ALC. Representatives of the three major divisions of American Lutheranism: the ULC, the Missouri Synod, and the ALC, will participate. They will emphasize the growing need of Lutheran unity in this day of crisis."...

I really felt that our committees on union gave the final word to the Missouri Committee at the last meeting in Chicago on further negotiations with the ALC. May I ask: what attitude will your committee take as to the new committee for the Missouri Synod? It is well to begin thinking about this now.<sup>238</sup>

What is interesting about the WELS/ELS correspondence between '35 and '41 is their mutual recognition of each other's confessional soundness and Lutheran approach to

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<sup>236</sup> Schuetze, *Synodical Conference*, 278.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Henry Ingebritson to John Brenner, letter, September 26, 1941, John Brenner Collection, File #173. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mequon, WI.

church union. It also shows that the various defenses made by both synods individually were not carried out in a vacuum, but were discussed as full brothers. In short, this correspondence shows a real fraternal bond between the ELS and the WELS. The WELS was not too big to consult her smaller sister when they were seeking to formulate their reply to the ULCA. The ELS was not too small to speak up and coordinate their efforts with the WELS in admonishing the Missouri Synod. This correspondence shows that the WELS and the ELS were not fighting individual battles with a common adversary, but were locked arm and arm when they faced that common adversary, supporting and coordinating their efforts with each other.

## II. The ELS defense of the WELS position on Church and Ministry (1940s-1950s)

The hermeneutical shibboleth among American Lutherans is how one speaks concerning the doctrines of church and ministry. Indeed, much of the dispute that has occurred over these doctrines is really a result of differing methodology in the interpretation of Holy Scripture. The more the current intra-ELS dispute over church and ministry evolves, the clearer it becomes that what is really at issue is the manner in which either side approaches the Scriptures in the formulation of doctrine. Indeed, the more one researches the church and ministry debate in the ELS during the 40s and 50s, the more one gets the feeling of *dejavu* in the present discussions.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Part of what clouds the discussion of these doctrines is that older terminology came to mean something different in subsequent generations. The problem therefore is not simply the terminology employed, but trying to divine what exactly was meant by those who employed it. For instance, many in the ELS employed “Missouri” terminology when discussing church and ministry without endorsing the “Missouri” position. There is a correlation here between language gaps that orthodox Christians had to wrestle with in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries during Christological controversies.

The ELS, in her desire to mediate and unify different confessional pockets within the rapidly unraveling Synodical Conference, was drawn into the Wisconsin/Missouri debate over church and ministry. Yet this debate revealed that there was no unanimity among her pastors and professors. They soon came to the realization that they first, as a synod, needed to come to a clear understanding of these twin doctrines. After an exhaustive study of Scripture, the Lutheran fathers and the history of the Synodical Conference, the ELS would come to defend the Wisconsin position as the Scriptural position.

#### *The position of the Old Norwegian Synod*

What was the position of the founding fathers of the Norwegian Synod in these matters? Some today within the ELS would like to assume that the Norwegian Synod fathers held the position that would later characterize the “Missouri” side: only the local congregation is established by God; the pastor is the only divinely ordained form of the public ministry. Oft quoted is the statement by Herman Amberg Preus,

The congregations joining to form a church body, and adopting a constitution, should be very guarded indeed, in freely relinquishing, in part, their liberty and independence, doing so out of kindly solicitude for their own and the common welfare, lest they delegate to the synod or general body any rights and powers which the Lord solely has entrusted to the congregations themselves, and which, when exercised by them, offer the best guarantee as to the preservation of the true faith...Much less ought the congregations assign to the general church body or its officers any power and authority by virtue of which their resolutions – even when not in conflict with God’s Word – could be construed as laws binding upon the congregations by virtue of divine authority, vested in them as superiors according to the fourth commandment. Such concessions on the part of the congregations would make of the synod a

papacy which might become just as anti-Christian as that of Rome.<sup>240</sup>

Many in the ELS today tacitly point to such a quotation as proof positive that the fathers of the Norwegian Synod held the Missouri position. Yet as one takes a closer look at the historical context of such a statement, as well as the entire corpus of writings regarding church and ministry by the Norwegian Synod, a very different picture begins to emerge. For instance, the above quotation does not deny that a synod in its own sense is a church. It is rather a warning that a synod not impinge on the work or rights of any individual congregation. It does not in any way imply that the local congregation is the only divinely ordained form of the church. There is a letter from C.F.W. Walther to J.A. Ottesen, January 25, 1862, in which Walther answers Ottesen's questions concerning the organization of parishes in the Norwegian Synod,

VIII. Since parochial boundaries are not originally determined by God, hence are not of divine right, they may...be changed, that is a parish may be divided into various parishes, several stations be combined into one, greater or smaller parts of a parish be transferred or added to another parish. Or, in case the membership grows, auxiliary offices for the various functions of the pastor may be established, as in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-7)

IX. A reason for changing the relation to a parish cannot 1) be an offense in adiaphora – the acknowledgment of such would be a denial of Christian liberty (Galatians 2:4,5); 2) not a difference in fundamental convictions....

I would not designate a parish as a “divine institution,” but rather an order made in accordance with the divine will.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Christian Anderson, *The Doctrinal Position of the Norwegian Synod* (Decorah: Posten Press, 1927), 13.

<sup>241</sup> “Letters from Walther to Ottesen” *Clergy Bulletin* 12, no. 8 (April 1953).

Such remarks are telling not only of Norwegian fathers' understanding of church and ministry but also of Walther's position on these doctrines. But there is more evidence that the early Norwegian fathers did not hold the inflexible and narrow view of the church and the ministry that has come to mark the Missouri position. Dr. Koren in his essay *The Right Principles of Church Government* comments about the nature and formation of synods,

But how about a whole church body, composed of many congregations? Is such a body instituted by God? Not directly. Wherever the apostles came and gathered souls by the word and sacraments, there a congregation was formed, the office of the word was established, and there was a church, such as described above. The fact that all believers in the various regions did not manifest themselves as a single church or congregation was due, not to the nature of essence of the Church, but to external circumstances...

According to its essence the Church is one...But since Christ, in accordance with His promise, is himself present in every place where He by His word has gathered a congregation and is in their midst with His gifts, therefore, each local congregation possesses everything it needs, and it does not have to look anywhere else for help in that respect...But the inner unity between such a congregation and other congregations which have the same faith is not broken thereby, for this follows from the nature of faith, Therefore we see also that there was such intimate union in faith and love between the apostolic congregations. Not any external compulsion, but the inner need, brought about their union.<sup>242</sup>

Therefore, the synod is a manifestation of the spiritual fellowship that exists between Christian congregations united in faith. Koren makes it clear that not only is the synod properly considered the church in its own right, but it is of utmost necessity to

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<sup>242</sup> U.V. Koren, "The Right Principles of Church Government" in *Faith of our Fathers: 1853-1953* edited by George Lillegard. (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company: Mankato), 130-131.

have a synod, for only by joining individual congregations together can the entire task that the Lord has given the Church be carried out,

It follows from the circumstances in which the Church exists here in this world that this inner need, in the course of time, will necessarily manifest itself through the planned cooperation between individual congregations. For if God's commands concerning the preservation of the Word, concerning the maintenance of the pastoral office, and concerning the qualifications of those who are to be put into this office are to be followed...if the command Christ has given concerning the preaching of the Gospel to all nations is to be carried out, if the need that love feels to help other suffering Christians, poor congregations, orphaned children, and lonely old people is to be filled, then it is self-evident that the individual congregation would not be able to carry it all out...

But if it, then, is a necessary consequence of faith and love that the inner unity of the Church manifest itself in external cooperation, how can this be done in a proper and God-pleasing way? Plainly, only by joining together into one body and by adopting certain rules for cooperation.<sup>243</sup>

Koren, wary of the past abuses of state church in Norway, also insists that the areas of labor between congregation and synod need to be clearly defined. The synod does together what the congregations cannot do individually, namely: worker training, publishing, and charitable institutions. Koren insists that the synod's authority in these areas gives it no right to interfere with the rights of the local congregation.

What about the doctrine of the ministry? Did the early Norwegian fathers have a narrow view that the pastor is the only divinely ordained form of the public ministry? One of the early controversies in the Norwegian Synod was over lay-preaching. Lay-preaching was the ear-mark of the pietistic revival of Hans Hauge and his disciple in

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<sup>243</sup> U.V. Koren, "The Right Principles of Church Government"  
<http://www.blts.edu/essays/korenUV/Right%20Principles%20of%20Church%20Government.pdf>.  
(Accessed December 23, 2009), 10-11.



America, Elling Eielsen. Eielsen in particular was the bitter enemy of ordained clergy. When Johannes Dietrichson, the first Norwegian pastor in America, asked Eielsen to cease his religious activity, Eielsen grabbed the beard of Dietrichson and exclaimed, “Hear me, you pope, I wish to be your pestilence while yet I may.”<sup>244</sup>

In the state church, actions like Eielsen were dealt with by the secular government, since in that system, such preaching without a call was literally illegal. But in America, where no such system existed, the Norwegian Synod properly appealed to Scripture. All believers were rightly considered priests before God. But no priest had the right to assume any authority over the other unless he was regularly called. Koren correctly comments on Article V of the Augsburg Confession,

There is no reference in this article to the work of the public ministry, by which the office of the word is to be performed in the congregation by certain persons who have been called to it. That is discussed later in the 14<sup>th</sup> article. Here the reference is to the essence, power, and effectual working of the means of grace. What is this effectual working? It is that which we confess in our Sunday Collect, when we give thanks that God “has given us His holy and blessed word,” and then add: “by which thou dost also among us gather Thy Christian Church.”

For the Church, the Kingdom of Christ, is “not of this world,” It is a kingdom of Spirit; it consists of people who are indeed ‘in the world but are not of the world, all whom have the Spirit of Christ, (Rom.8:9), and are born again of water and of the Spirit.’<sup>245</sup>

Therefore, properly speaking, there is but one office in the church: the office of preaching the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. However, Koren also clearly taught

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<sup>244</sup> George Orvick, “The Life and Legacy of Ulrik Vilhelm Koren” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (March 2005), 62.

<sup>245</sup> Koren, *Right Principles*, 118.

the divine institution of the public ministry and the necessity of it among Christian congregations,

If the Christians are a people of “kings and priests” and have a spiritual priesthood, why should it then be necessary to establish the preaching office and call pastors? Is it not, at least, a matter of liberty which they can arrange for themselves as they please? No, it is not a human ordinance. God wants it to be so...

In another place he [St. Paul] describes these teachers and overseers as the gifts of the ascended Savior to the congregation and shows what the Savior’s purpose with this gift is, saying (Eph. 4, 11 ff.) “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers”...for what purpose?... “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for edifying of the body of Christ”...And what is prevented, thereby? He says: “That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.”<sup>246</sup>

### *A clear position muddled*

There was nothing in the position of Koren and the Norwegian Synod with which any of the later Wauwatosa men would disagree. But Koren’s clarity on the doctrines of church and ministry would become muddled among the Norwegians in the years to come. The ridged dogmatism that the Wauwatosa men saw in Missouri had already infected the Norwegian Synod by the time of the Madison Settlement. The greater majority of pastors and laity had already succumbed to the lack of activity in the Word. This apathy allowed the political maneuvering of a few to carry the Norwegian Synod into the unscriptural merger.

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<sup>246</sup> Koren, *Right Principles*, 124-125.

But even the faithful few who had left to form the reorganized Norwegian Synod were not entirely unaffected by this dogmatism when it came to their expressions concerning the doctrines of church and ministry. There were, of course, reasons that ELS pastors in the early days of her existence might have been more inclined to the “Missouri” position. The reorganized Norwegian Synod had, naturally, become wary of any synod political machinery. In those days, the high emotions wrought by the devastating impact of the Madison Settlement caused many to see the “synod” as the root of the problem. Rev. Christian Anderson (ELS) comments,

An institution in the Old Synod often mentioned was the so-called Church Council (Kirkeraad). It is sometimes spoken of as the root of all evil in the Synod...

Dr. Koren was a member of the Church Council from 1861 until his death in 1910. Through his long tenure in office he gained a great deal of influence, which was freely made use of also in practical matters. This caused growing resentment in many quarters. And this dissatisfaction gave strength to the more liberal element which was developing...

We see this same danger asserting itself in other synods, even if the vehicles of power may be called by different names.<sup>247</sup>

This fear must be coupled with the close relation that ELS had with the Missouri Synod and its leading theologians. In the early years of the synod the majority of the new pastors for the fledgling ELS were trained at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. When taking in both the practical and historical context of the early ELS, along with their arrangement of worker training, it is easy to see how the understanding of older terminology became muddled in the close knit ranks of the ELS. Examples of this abound. M.K. Bleken asserted that the congregation is by divine right while the synod is

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<sup>247</sup> Anderson, *Underlying Causes*, 6.

simply a human organization.<sup>248</sup> Christian Anderson articulates the same “Missouri” stance in a brief pamphlet stating the doctrinal position of the Norwegian Synod,

In the course of the controversies concerning the Church and the Ministry, the view held by the Norwegian Synod regarding the true relations between the local congregation and the synod, as such, gradually became defined. God has instituted the local congregation. He has entrusted to it the Office of the Keys. No individual or group of individuals has the right to exercise authority over the local congregation. God has not instituted Synods as such. We find in the Scriptures no trace of such an organization. Synods have come into existence because the congregations have voluntarily agreed to enter into such mutual relations. The congregations are thereby enabled more easily to work together for the training of pastors and teachers, for carrying on missionary activity at home and abroad, for Christian benevolences, etc. The synod thereby becomes only a medium which makes it possible for congregations of the same faith to function more energetically and efficiently in matters of common interest.<sup>249</sup>

Adolph Harstad Sr., a second generation ELS pastor, wrote a paper defending the Missouri position on church and ministry sometime in the 30s or 40s. While he does not mention the Wauwatosa men by name, he attacks basic assertions that the “Wisconsin” position advocates. He writes in his opening paragraph,

He [Hoenecke] opposes the doctrine that in its concrete forms the service of the Word is a matter of human origin or merely historical development. Also Hoenecke recognizes in the commissioning of the Twelve the institution of the ministry as it essentially exists in the Christian Church today...

For the New Testament period since the time of the Apostles there is just one office in the church by divine institution: the ministry. That the office of the Christian ministry is the only office instituted by God to deal with men through his Word, and that the one office thus

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<sup>248</sup> Bleken, *The Scriptural Principle*, 11.

<sup>249</sup> Anderson, *The Doctrinal Position of the Norwegian Synod*, 13.

establishes all functions of the ministry (also those commonly delegated to auxiliary offices) is clear from three or four passages from the New Testament...

The objection may here be raised: Were not the various offices named in Romans 12:6-8; Ephesians 4:11; I Cor. 12:28 independent offices, or did they not at least exist as subdivisions of the main office BY DIVINE RIGHT? Our first answer is that close scrutiny of the text shows a reference to gifts of the Lord's grace, not offices...

To quote Kretzmann again, pg. 6, "It is clear, then, according to the Bible, that the call, properly speaking, refers to the entire office of the ministry and includes all its functions. *This is clearly indicated also in our confessions, not only in Article 5 of the Augustana – but Article 14...*"<sup>250</sup> (Emphasis mine)

And still, even with such entrenched "Missouri" positions on church and ministry, there is other evidence that shows that the distance between the WELS and the ELS regarding these doctrines was not as far as one might initially have figured. A closer reading of those who employ "Missouri" terminology reveals that their premise about a synod being a "human arrangement" does not agree with their conclusions about the role and function of a synod. M.K. Bleken, who insisted that the Synod is by human arrangement, went on to say that the synod's purpose is to "hold firm to the good confession, promote unity of the Spirit, and be of help and support to the individual congregations for the defense and preservation of the truth."<sup>251</sup> One has a hard time seeing how synod can have such an active involvement with the means of grace and yet not be considered a "church" in its own right.

There is further anecdotal evidence. Rev. Ahlert Strand, in a 1944 ELS convention essay entitled "Our Mission as a Synod," states that the primary mission of

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<sup>250</sup> Adolph Harstad, "The Doctrine of the Call to the Ministry" ELS presidential files: 1930s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>251</sup> Bleken, *The Scriptural Principle*, 11.

the synod was to maintain the Word and sacraments in their truth and purity among the congregations banded together and to properly apply them and share them with others.<sup>252</sup> Strand further clarifies the mission of the synod by specifically stating how a synod is to go about carrying out these directives. While Strand's purpose was not to defend the belief that the synod in its own right is a form of the "church," one can hardly escape that conclusion after reading his essay.

In Okabena, MN, there was a LCMS congregation, St. John's, served by a Rev. George Schweikert. Schweikert was a solidly confessional, Lutheran pastor who was troubled by the doctrinal deviations within the Missouri Synod. Eventually, Schweikert would lead his congregation out of the Missouri Synod, and he himself would serve the ELS as the pastor of congregations in North Dakota and New York.<sup>253</sup> What is interesting about Schweikert was that his trouble with the LCMS did not stop at fellowship, scouting or chaplaincy. Schweikert was also quite adamantly against the Missouri position that the local pastorate was the only divinely ordained form of the public ministry. Schweikert, in his church newsletter, the *Okabena Lutheran*, writes,

Yes, They Have a "Divine Call"

Church workers outside the so-called local pastorate, especially they who more or less labor in Word and doctrine, have a divine call. Why?

- 1.) They all have the direct call as Christians to serve God in and by his Word.

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<sup>252</sup> Ahlert Strand, "Our Mission as a Synod" (paper presented to the 27<sup>th</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, Koshkonong, WI, June 9-14, 1944.) 23-24.

<sup>253</sup> St. John's, Okabena, is currently a member of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. For 25 years it remained an independent Lutheran church in fellowship with the WELS and ELS, before joining the CLC in 1976. Correspondence between Milton Tweit and C.M.Gullerud shows that the ELS had received Schweikert as a brother in faith along with his congregation when they left the LCMS. However, this put Gamber in a pickle, because the LCMS formed an opposition congregation in Okabena and refused to recognize Schweikert and St. John's as being in fellowship with the LCMS district. Gamber was particularly angry with Gullerud for his reception of Schweikert. Letter Gullerud to Tweit, Jan. 5, 1954.

- 2.) By virtue of the work they do, divinely ordained work, we regard them as having a divine call.
- 3.) Their fellow Christians have delegated to them divinely given obligations, which also make their call divine.

#### Misunderstanding

This subject is a much-discussed one in pastoral conferences now. And where there is disagreement, it is caused by lack of distinction...

Now we must distinguish between the different kinds of calls issued because of the different work our workers do...As long as they are working in harmony with God's command to build the Kingdom of God, their work is divine work, and the calling into it divine also as noted above.<sup>254</sup>

In addition to Schweikert's instruction, he also informed his congregation about a free conference to discuss this very issue at St. John's Lutheran Church (WELS), in Sleepy Eye, MN. Here is the interesting part. The presenter for the conference, who also argued for the Wisconsin position, was Rev. Stuart Dorr, the ELS pastor in Tracy, MN and member of the Bethany Board of Regents. That an ELS pastor of Dorr's standing would be the presenter of the "Wisconsin" position demonstrates that a number of men in the ELS, already by the late 40s, favored the Wisconsin Synod understanding of church and ministry.

But there is more direct evidence that many held to the "Wisconsin" position within the ELS. In personal correspondence with Rev. John Buenger of the LCMS, Professor George Lillegard stated a position on church and ministry that was in complete agreement with the Wisconsin position. The close of the letter is perhaps the most interesting. After dealing with Buenger's objections to the Wisconsin Synod position, Lillegard writes,

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<sup>254</sup> *Okabena Lutheran*, Church Newsletter, April 1 1948. Brenner files #174. Wisconsin Lutheran Synod Archives, Mequon, WI.

What I contend for, then, is that the divinely instituted office of the ministry is not to be limited to the pastorate of a local congregation, but must apply just as much to a missionary, the teacher of theology, etc. *This is the position the old Norwegian Synod **always** took, and if there is a lack of unity in our circles today, it has come from those who have studied at St. Louis and imbibed ideas with regard to the ministry which are peculiar to certain Missourians.*<sup>255</sup>  
(Emphasis mine)

Buenger, in a letter to Norman Madson, then Dean of the newly established Bethany Lutheran Seminary, recognizes reciprocally that the “Wisconsin” position was taught by the Norwegians,

Last week young Mr. Hilton, a student at Wartburg Seminary, Dubuque, called on me again. He told me that he had been in Mankato and had talked with you. You know his wish had been to finish his studies at Mankato. But when I asked him what he would do he told me that he could not yet make up his mind since the Wis. Doctrine of Church and Ministry has now entered the Norwegian Synod also and he could not agree with your position in this question.<sup>256</sup>

#### *A position clarified*

As has been stated, there is among those in the ELS a reverence for the fathers of the Lutheran Church and their doctrinal formulations. They were perfectly content with the phrases and concepts of the fathers until it became evident that the father’s inexact speech (such as Gerhardt’s *intuitu fidei*) or the misuse of a previously understood phrase became the source of doctrinal strife. The debate over doctrine of church and ministry was yet another example of the ELS, pressed in a doctrinal debate, to give up on past terminology since in the present debate it was being used to obfuscating the truth of

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<sup>255</sup> George Lillegard to John Buenger, letter, December 11, 1947. Norman Madson Papers Box 2, XII.68 Correspondence 1947. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>256</sup> John Buenger to Norman Madson Letter June 14, 1947 Norman Madson Papers Box 2 XII.49 Correspondence 1947. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.



Scripture.<sup>257</sup> The ELS, due to its solid hermeneutical principles, insisted that the Word of God alone must be the arbitrator of all theological matters, including the church and ministry debate between the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods. Therefore, in the 40s and 50s, the ELS set out to study intensely both sides of the church and ministry debate, letting Scripture judge between the two. The result is a consistent defense of the Wisconsin Synod position, which, from the perspective of the ELS, was nothing more than the historic position of the Norwegian Synod.

How did the ELS get drawn into the Missouri-Wisconsin debate in the first place? The theological factions that started to appear in the Missouri Synod during the 1930s, 40s and 50s were not as clearly defined as one thinks. There were not just the “liberals” on one side and the “conservatives” on the other. There were many subgroups within those two blanket categories. There were the moderate peacemakers, who tried to keep the pot from boiling over through ecclesial give and take. There were the scholarly conservatives, men like Martin Franzmann, who while personally very confessional, had sympathy for scholarly pursuits and wanted to still allow “academic” freedom and inquiry. There were the flaming liberals. There were the solidly confessional and scriptural pastors like Schweikert. Then there were the traditionalists, men like Paul Kretzmann, John Buenger and many of the voices in the *Confessional Lutheran*.

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<sup>257</sup> Professor George Lillegard was perhaps the first in the ELS to recognize this occurring with traditionalist Missourians like Buenger. Lillegard comments, “To say that Jesus while on earth served only as a pastor, and not as a missionary, is to give the term “pastor” a wider connotation that it ordinarily has, or else must be termed contrary to the facts of Christ’s ministry...Furthermore, it is to me very significant that Christ used the terms “apostles”, which means exactly the same as “missionaries” and did not use the term “shepherds” or “bishops” or “pastors.” How can you argue that the apostles were not missionaries when they are called that? Would you say that Jesus did not know how to choose the terms that would express his meaning?” Lillegard to Buenger, December 11, 1947.

What is often forgotten about the church and ministry debate in the Synodical Conference is that it made rather strange bedfellows. For instance, there were many “liberals” within the LCMS who endorsed the Wisconsin Synod position on church and ministry or used it in an elaborate game of “bait and switch” to justify a changed doctrinal position in fellowship, scouting and chaplaincy. Theodore Graebner of the LCMS was just such a person. After a unionistic service in New York City, he justified his position, which was at odds with the Synodical Conference, by saying that the LCMS has tolerated the different doctrine of the Wisconsin Synod for years in regards to church and ministry. To make matters worse, Graebner’s statement was published in the LCMS periodical *The Lutheran Witness*.

For traditionalists like Kretzmann and Buenger, this proved not only Graebner and those of his ilk were in error, but so also the Wisconsin Synod in regards to church and ministry. Buenger stated this very thought in a letter to Norman Madson,

We deceive ourselves if we try to persuade ourselves that the whole difference is nothing but a different terminology. Of course the terminology is different, but it is different because there are two different conceptions of the ministry which cannot be possibly harmonized.<sup>258</sup>

For a traditionalist like Buenger, any change in historic terminology must be a sign of a change in doctrine. So now, within the Synodical Conference, there was a sense of mistrust between those who perhaps, in all other respects, were united in their protest against the liberal spirit filling the Synodical Conference. Norman Madson recognized this problem. Having lived through one merger, he was not optimistic about the outcome of the current path Missouri had set herself on. It was, however, his hope that the

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<sup>258</sup> John Buenger to Norman Madson Letter May 31, 1948 Norman Madson Papers Box 2 XIII52 Correspondence 1948. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

Wisconsin, ELS and the faithful of the LCMS, might maintain their bonds not only in the current protest, but even after the fallout that was sure to come. In a letter to Buenger, Madson puts it this way,

I certainly hope that the conservative Missourians will try to get together with Wisconsin on the points at issue, in the doctrines of the church and the ministry. For I see little prospect of saving the Mo. Synod as a whole. Here they “are going the whole hog” into unionism...the Wis. Men, on the other hand, are taking a strong stand publicly against unionism.<sup>259</sup>

The ELS wanted the faithful Missourians to unite with the Wisconsin men, but the church and ministry issue continued to be a major sticking point for many “good” Missourians. But in order to serve as mediator between these groups, the ELS needed to examine her own confessional position regarding church and ministry.

By 1943, this synod-wide study was in full swing. The ELS’ *Clergy Bulletin* became inundated with a discussion of the doctrines of church and ministry. C.M. Gullerud, George Lillegard, and Norman Madson corresponded with J.P. Meyer at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary requesting the documentation and official statements regarding Wisconsin’s position, which Meyer enthusiastically supplied.<sup>260</sup> This study would continue for next 7 years, until Kretzmann and others broke away to form the Orthodox Lutheran Conference.

There are three noteworthy aspects of the synod-wide study. First, both the Wisconsin and Missouri sides of the debate received a full and fair hearing. ELS pastor Clarence Hanson compiled a bibliography of all the relevant material for the discussion

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<sup>259</sup> Norman Madson to John Buenger, letter, January 15, 1948 Norman Madson Papers Box 2 XIII.3 Correspondence 1948. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>260</sup> John P. Meyer to Norman Madson, letter, March 23, 1944. Norman Madson Papers Box 2, X.11 Correspondence 1944. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

of church and ministry.<sup>261</sup> The list cites various articles in popular periodicals, symbolic references, essays in theological journals, dogmatics texts and historical studies. The list was so detailed that it took up an entire installment of the *Clergy Bulletin*!

The Hanson bibliography further reveals the second noteworthy aspect of the study – a consciousness of history. Hanson’s list connected the current debate to previous church and ministry debates, most notably the Walther-Grabau-Loeche ministry debate and the lay-preaching controversy among the Norwegians. The “historical consciousness” gave the ELS a clear view of the *status controversae*. In addition, it allowed them to distinguish the past employment of dogmatic terminology in relation to its current usage. In other words, the attention to historical context guarded the ELS pastor from taking the words of a revered father out of context or extend their meaning beyond what they had intended.

This historical consciousness set the stage for the most important aspect of the ELS’ doctrinal study – Scripture alone establishes all article of doctrine (*Sola Scriptura*). In the discussions concerning the doctrines of church and ministry during the 40s and the 50s, the ELS theologians and pastors made, time and again, a strong distinction between the opinions and expressions of the Lutheran fathers and the authoritative Word of God. To the ELS, no matter how respected a father’s writings were, be he Luther, Walther, Gerhardt or Koren, he was never to be put on the same plane as Scripture. This last aspect is most clearly demonstrated in the writings of Bethany Seminary Professor George Lillegard.

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<sup>261</sup> Clarence Hanson, “Bibliography on the Ministerial Office & Ordination” *Clergy Bulletin* 5, no 4 (December 1945), 1-3.

Lillegard was the foremost exegete and authority on biblical hermeneutics in the ELS. He had published books on biblical hermeneutics, Old Testament Isagogics, as well as *From Eden to Egypt*, a devotional commentary on the book of Genesis which remains a classic in Lutheran devotional literature. He, along with Norman Madson, deserves a great credit for making exegesis as valued a discipline as dogmatics in the seminary curriculum of the ELS. It is Lillegard who consistently points out from Scripture that the Wisconsin position is the orthodox position. The position of the traditionalist Missourians like Kretzmann, on the other hand, is actually a derivation from Scripture as well as from Luther and Walther.

In a response to a paper delivered by Kretzmann, the main thrust of which had been that the term “ekklesia” is only be used for a local congregation or the Holy Christian Church, and no other assembly, Lillegard writes,

In general, the authority of Luther is appealed to as over against that of such lexicographers as Kittel, etc. We can find no contradiction between Luther and modern authorities...

It is denied that Ekklesia ever refers to “the whole church in a given area.” The fact remains, however, that all the standard texts of the New Testament today put the singular form in Acts 9:31 and that the singular is found in other passages too, in a great many manuscripts. We shall not enter here into the historical question, as to whether the early church had any assemblies corresponding to our “synod meetings.” We know that “synods” as we have them are a comparatively new thing in the church. The essential point is that there was a real bond of fellowship between the scattered Christian churches, which manifested itself in both practical and spiritual matters, and that representatives of other churches did gather with the “mother church” in Jerusalem to decide on matters that threatened that fellowship... We believe that our American Lutheran congregations are the ideal form of organization in the Church, but we do not deny to others who have

different forms of church organization the right to be called Ekklesia, if only they use the Word and Sacraments.<sup>262</sup>

Lillegard also asserts that there are three points of clear biblical teaching regarding the local congregation and the synod that all Lutherans must agree upon:

- 1.) We have the biblical precept and example for the gathering of Christians in local assemblies, to hear the preaching of the Word, use the Sacraments, exercise evangelical discipline, etc. But we have no precept or rules telling us just what form of organization should be adopted by these assemblies, - the kind of offices and the number of officers differing greatly the various places and the various times, according to the circumstances. There is but one rule: "Let all things be done decently and in order."
- 2.) We have biblical precept and example pointing to the need and duty of maintaining fraternal relationship with other orthodox Christians in other places, both far and near. We have also both precept and example as to the kind of activities this larger fellowship should undertake; settling doctrinal disputes, helping brethren in need, arranging for missionary activity, etc. But we have no precepts or rules covering the organization of this larger fellowship, what kind of machinery it is to set up, what officers it should have, etc.
- 3.) Any form of teaching or system of organization that robs the individual of his rights and privileges as "a royal priest" whether on the local or wider level, is on the face of it wrong. "Sovereignty" is an attribute of the individual Christian; only because he knows no other master than the Lord himself can sovereignty be ascribed also to the local congregation to which he belongs.<sup>263</sup>

Kretzmann would not sit still for this. In a rebuttal to Lillegard's objections, Kretzmann fired back, basically reiterating his chief points with more fire than before. But Lillegard again points out that Kretzmann's arguments are not in keeping with the clear text of Scripture. First he makes it clear that the English word "church" or

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<sup>262</sup> George, Lillegard, "Some Objections to the Meaning of Ekklesia Considered" *Clergy Bulletin* 9, no. 6 (February 1950), 51-53.

<sup>263</sup> Lillegard, *Some Objections*, 53.

“congregation” has a much narrower meaning to an English speaker than the word “ekklesia” does to a Greek speaker. “Ekklesia” has more a meaning of “assembly” in English, a much broader term that can be used for both a secular and a sacred gathering.

Lillegard goes on to write,

The Wisconsin position, based as it was from the beginning on a thorough study of the original Greek, is entirely correct when it says...that “ekklesia” is a term which applies with equal propriety to the various groupings into which the Holy Spirit gathered His believers, local congregations as well as larger groups. *It is a mistake to say, as some Missourians do, that “the congregation is the only divinely designated body or unit of the visible church.”...*

Thus it is correct to say, as Wisconsin has done: “A Synod is also an ekklesia,” meaning that a Synod is an “assembly,” which is all that “ekklesia” in Scripture means...

What Wisconsin has contended for, then, is not that a Synod should rule over the congregations or take from them any of their rights and duties, but that a Synod should not be denied any of the rights and duties it possesses as an assembly of believing Christians. It wants each kind of assembly, both the congregation and the synod, to function in the way the Lord of the Church directs...*The Wisconsin men have, in this discussion, shown themselves better students of the words of the Bible, and hence better theologians.*<sup>264</sup>(Emphasis mine)

But Lillegard’s greatest defense of the “Wisconsin” position was to be published in the September, 1951 edition of the *Clergy Bulletin*. The reason for this elaborate three and a half page defense was an essay of Missouri Synod pastor John Buenger that had been sent to ELS pastors. Buenger, who held fervently to the “Missouri” position, had written a scathing paper castigating the Wisconsin position as a departure from the

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<sup>264</sup> George Lillegard, “Comments on the above by G.O.L” *Clergy Bulletin* 9, no. 3 (November 1949), 29-30.

historic Lutheran position and had it published in the June 1951 edition of the *Confessional Lutheran*. It was entitled, oddly enough, “A Friendly Word to our Brethren in the Wisconsin Synod.”

In the article, Buenger accused the Wisconsin Synod of revising and developing truth that had been laid out clearly in the Confessions.<sup>265</sup> He further accused the Wisconsin Synod of teaching that gathering together in congregation is a matter of Christian liberty, that the Wisconsin Synod gave any chance gathering of Christians the right to excommunicate, and that the Synod had power over the local congregation.<sup>266</sup> He asserted, among other things, that all the truth of Scripture is clearly expounded upon by the Lutheran fathers, that the Lutheran Confessions taught only the pastor of a local congregation is divinely ordained and that synods are merely man-made institutions.<sup>267</sup>

The article caused such uproar in the ELS that a resolution was passed by the General Pastoral Conference to not only publish Buenger’s essay in the *Clergy Bulletin*, but also publish George Lillegard’s rebuttal. This brief reply by Lillegard not only clearly and evangelically corrects the false caricatures of the Wisconsin Synod positions on church and ministry, but defends the hermeneutical methods that were used in the formulation of the Wisconsin Synod positions. Lillegard clearly sides with the Wauwatosa methodology in approaching the Scriptures against the *Vatertheologie* advocated by Buenger,

Under “Quoting the Fathers in Controversy,” the writer [Buenger] tries to make out that professors Koehler and Pieper followed a wrong principle when they warned against basing doctrine on statements of “the fathers” rather than on Scripture alone. The fact remains, however, that

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<sup>265</sup> George Lillegard, “Church and Ministry” *Clergy Bulletin 11*, no. 1 (September 1951), 3-6.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*



this is definitely a Lutheran principle. Errors arise in the church when theologians start with dogmatic statements, whether their own or those of famous “fathers,” and use Scripture only to support the preconceived notions thus derived, instead of starting with the Scriptures and proving all dogma from them.<sup>268</sup>

Furthermore, Lillegard continues,

Pieper and Koehler claimed that their views on church and ministry were in harmony with Dr. Walther’s view, and that the opposite views were in reality a departure from Walther as well as from the Scriptures. They did not reject the use of “the fathers” to prove that a certain teaching is a genuine Lutheran teaching, nor did they question the orthodoxy of the Luther, Walther, etc. They only warned against using their statements to prove points which these *in reality did not discuss or treat at all.*<sup>269</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Lillegard then goes on to show that many of the arguments that Buenger advances are not only on shaky exegetical grounds, but also shaky historical and confessional grounds. For instance, Buenger had stated, “While the invisible church began with the preaching of John the Baptist, the first Christian Church in the sense of a visible body was founded by the Holy Ghost himself as a local congregation at Jerusalem.”<sup>270</sup>

Lillegard eviscerates this premise by quoting Matthew 18, Matthew 16, Matthew 10, and John 9. On top of this, Lillegard advances, was the Church not already established in the Old Testament?<sup>271</sup> Furthermore, Lillegard insists that the Confessional writings do not say anything about the divine institution of the local congregation or the local pastorate. They certainly do not support the idea that all other offices are subordinate to the local pastorate. He states,

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<sup>268</sup> Lillegard, *Church and Ministry*, 3.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Lillegard, *Church and Ministry*, 4.

<sup>271</sup> Lillegard, *Church and Ministry*, 5.

The Confessions emphasize that it is the congregation alone which has the right and power to call a man to the divine office, but they nowhere say that it is only the man who is called to serve a local congregation of whom it can be affirmed that he holds the divinely established ministerial office.<sup>272</sup>

Lillegard quickly pointed out that the Wisconsin Synod did not teach that it is a matter of Christian liberty either to found Christian congregations or to have Christian ministers. However, the manner in which Christian congregations organizes or in what manner the divinely instituted office of the ministry is carried out is a matter of Christian liberty,

When the Wisconsin Synod speaks about “Christian liberty,” in connection with the establishment of the various offices in the Church, it does not mean that the office held by the apostles was established in Christian liberty by the Church...but it does say that it was a matter of Christian liberty for the church to call one man to be a missionary, another a pastor of a local congregation, another a supervisor or “bishop” (in the modern sense of the word), another a theological professor, etc. Churches may combine or divide these offices as they please and still be following the Scriptural teaching with regard to the public ministry of the Word...

Wisconsin does not say that it is a matter of Christian liberty whether to found Christian churches or not. On the contrary, it agrees with Missouri...But Wisconsin does say that the manner in which the Christians organized, whether in small groups such as “the church in the house” referred to in Philemon 2, or in larger groups covering a whole city (I Corinthians 1,2 etc.), or in what we would call “synods,” i.e. including all the churches in a larger area in one group (Acts 9:31; Acts 15:23 “The brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia”), --this was a matter of Christian liberty. *We hold that on this point Wisconsin is right and Missouri wrong.*<sup>273</sup> (Emphasis mine)

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<sup>272</sup> Lillegard, *Church and Ministry*, 4.

<sup>273</sup> Lillegard, *Church and Ministry*, 4-5.

What makes the testimony and defense of the Wisconsin position by Lillegard so powerful is the fact that he has arrived at the same conclusions as the Wisconsin men quite independently. Lillegard sat neither at the feet of Koehler or Pieper. The hermeneutics notes he used at Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary were based upon those of Ludwig Fuerbringer of Concordia, St. Louis and William Paterson of Luther Seminary, St. Paul.<sup>274</sup> His ties with the Missouri Synod ran much deeper than with Wisconsin. And yet, because his approach to Scripture (the Norwegian Hermeneutic) was essentially the same as the Wauwatosa theologians, he came to defend their method and their exposition on the doctrines of church and ministry. Moreover, he saw this position as completely in line with those of Luther, Walther and Koren.

How accepted was Lillegard's defense by other Norwegian men like Harstad and Anderson, whose earlier writings had so tenaciously held to the Missouri position? The readers may judge for themselves. Anderson delivered a doctrinal essay dealing with the doctrine of the ministry at a General Pastoral Conference in April of 1950. There is not a single statement in the essay with which the Wisconsin Synod would disagree. For instance, Anderson clearly teaches that the public ministry is derived from the universal priesthood of all believers.<sup>275</sup> Furthermore, Anderson demonstrates that there were multiple grades of ministry in the New Testament, and while the ministry itself is divinely instituted, the calling body of the church maintains the right and liberty to

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<sup>274</sup> George Lillegard, "Biblical Hermeneutics or Principles of Bible Interpretation Based on Works on Hermeneutics by Prof. W.M.H. Paterson, St. Paul, MN 1896; Dr. L. Fuerbringer, St. Louis, MO, 1912; Dr. C.O. Hoffmann, St. Louis Edition, 1876 of *Institutiones Theologiae Exegeticae* (Wittenberg, 1754)" Compiled 1957. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary On-line Essay File. <http://www.wlsessays.net/authors/L/LillegardHermeneutics/LillegardHermeneutics.PDF>. (Accessed July 22, 2008).

<sup>275</sup> Christian Anderson, "The Passages on the Office of the Ministry," *Clergy Bulletin* 9, no. 10 (May 1950), 73.

determine how the ministry is carried out in a particular place.<sup>276</sup> Finally, Anderson even admits that the Synod is also the church.<sup>277</sup> Even as early as 1921, Anderson insisted that “there is no fixed command about [external organization] in the New Testament; it is entrusted to the believers in freedom according to the guidance of God’s Word to adapt themselves as they find it most beneficial according to circumstances.”<sup>278</sup>

When examining Anderson’s various essays and writings regarding church and ministry during his long service to the ELS, one can only come to one of two conclusions. First, Anderson changed the position he held in 1927. His 1950 essay is filled with exegetical notes about the New Testament vocabulary for ministry, which certainly may be interpreted to mean that he studied these issues more deeply. But perhaps more likely is the alternative, given the statements that he made already in his 1921 conference essay. Anderson clarified his position after controversy made it necessary to do so. This is in keeping with the Norwegian hermeneutical expression that honors the terms and usages of the past until the abuse of such terms calls for clearer explanation.

Yet another example of a changed or clarified position is Adolph Harstad. Harstad, in addressing a 1972 General Pastoral Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, candidly admits,

The writer of these lines was once just as insistent as any are today in the narrower application of the term church and ministry. Much to his regret now, he even became belligerent toward certain revered and learned theologians of our synod who held the other, wider application of these

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<sup>276</sup> Anderson, *Passages...*, 77.

<sup>277</sup> Anderson, *Passages...*, 76.

<sup>278</sup> Christian Anderson, “The Invisible Church,” (paper presented to the 3<sup>rd</sup> regular convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, Koshkonong, WI, August 4-10, 1921.) 9. Translation by Rev. Mark DeGarmeaux.

terms. *He is persuaded now that these terms cannot rightfully and scripturally be limited according to the manner indicated above.* It cannot definitely and finally be nailed down from Scripture that the term “church” applies only either to the universal church or to the local congregation...

And those who want to limit the term of pastor and teacher only to the pastorate of a local congregation... are forced to say that the omission of “*tous de*” before “*didaskalous*” nails this down without a shadow of a doubt...

There must be a definite Word of God to establish doctrine. That which cannot be established by clear Scripture as a teaching of the Bible should not be made into a doctrine to which all must bow.

One of the fathers of our ELS has been singled out and quoted for this narrower view of the church and ministry. It is understandable how this father came to assert this. *However, this should not be elevated to the position of general acceptance by all the fathers of the ELS. Other fathers did not teach this. We have proof for this...*

*All teachers of God's Word are precious, and we must be careful not to lose any of them. But also, we must be careful not to elevate to the position of doctrine something which cannot be proved to be such. We must take our reason captive under obedience to Christ and His Word.<sup>279</sup>*  
(Emphasis mine)

Through careful exegesis, the Norwegian men came to defend the WELS position because, from their own study, it was the Scriptural position. As has been shown, this defense can hardly be attributed as the “little sister” nodding obediently to Wisconsin. Any insinuation or accusation the ELS men were but kowtowing to the WELS is both unjust and unfounded. If one thing is clear about the ELS, they keep their own counsel. If

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<sup>279</sup> Adolph Harstad, “Church and Ministry” [paper presented at the 1972 General Pastoral conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Minneapolis, MN, January 1972.]  
<http://www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/lutherantheology.harstadchurchadmin.html> (accessed June 15, 2008.)

they ever support a doctrinal position, it is because they themselves have become convinced of its truth by a patient and thorough study of the Scriptures.

Furthermore, the ELS defense of the Wisconsin position is perhaps one of the clearest demonstrations that the WELS position on church and ministry was that of Walther, Koren and Hoenecke. Time and again, ELS men like Dorr, Lillegard and Madson voiced that the WELS position was not only doctrinally correct, but in agreement with the historic position of the Synodical Conference and the Old Norwegian Synod. As Lillegard stated so clearly, “This is the position the Old Norwegian Synod always took.”<sup>280</sup>

What does this defense of the Wisconsin position demonstrate? First, it shows that the principle of *Sola Scriptura* was alive and active in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, thus again uniting both the Wisconsin Synod and the ELS through a common approach to Scripture. Secondly, it sheds greater light on why many “good” Missourians, like Buenger, did not find a home in either the WELS or the ELS. They made the fatal theological error so common to traditionalists – making exegetical theology fit systematic theology, rather than letting systematic theology result from exegesis.

Finally, this defense of the WELS in the church and ministry debate protected the flanks of the WELS/ELS unity while they were fighting the direct battles over scouting, chaplaincy, fellowship and later, the Scriptures themselves. The Norwegian defense of Wisconsin’s position prevented a wedge from being driven between their fellowships at this crucial stage of conflict within the Synodical Conference.

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<sup>280</sup> Lillegard to Buenger.

### III. The Fehner Case (1949-1953)

The story behind the creation of Our Savior Lutheran Church (LCMS), Mankato, MN and the activities of her first pastor, Alvin Fehner, is a one full of regret and pain. It is a story of Synodical Conference civil war, church politics at their worst, and a deep sense of betrayal by a former friend. But it is also one of the clearest examples of how united the Wisconsin Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod had become by the late 40s and early 50s.

In 1949 four members of Immanuel Lutheran Church (WELS), Mankato, MN had become frustrated at the position Pastor Gervasius Fischer maintained against scouting. The four men (Marvin Hoyer, Karl Malwitz, Arnold Meyer and Hilbert Hantelman) asked for their release from Immanuel under the pretext of starting a Missouri Synod mission church in Mankato. The request was tentatively granted only after the men had met with the officials from the Wisconsin and Missouri Synod.

At a November 9, 1949 meeting at Immanuel, the four petitioners gave an oral promise to Minnesota District President Oscar Naumann that this new congregation was to be a sister congregation and not an opposition congregation. Their stated reasons for wanting to form a new congregation affiliated with the Missouri Synod was: 1) they were originally members of the Missouri Synod; 2) they felt at home and liked the Missouri Synod; 3) Immanuel was too large and there was room for another Lutheran church in Mankato.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Pastor G.W. Fischer, Mankato Case Notes and Documentation, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN. Fischer had long been acquainted with the ELS. Fischer was the first pastor of Eastside in Madison, and was involved with the Eastside Case. He also became further acquainted with ELS men Norman Madson, S.C. Ylvisaker, and Christian Anderson while serving as a Wisconsin Synod representative on the Synodical Conference production of *The Lutheran Hymnal*. Fischer had been serving St. Jacobi Lutheran Church in the Milwaukee area when, in 1949, he received the call the call to serve as the associate pastor of Immanuel in Mankato. Fischer had

There was, of course, a serious question raised by the last point. True, Immanuel was a large congregation, but at that time there was also St. Paul's Lutheran Church in North Mankato. In addition, the west end mission (later St. Mark's Congregation WELS)<sup>282</sup> had just begun and was in need of support. In addition to that, there was the ELS congregation, Mt. Olive, located just up the hill from Immanuel. Even Pastor Palmer, the chairman of the Minnesota District Mission Board of the Wisconsin Synod, offered to build these men a chapel and support their work.<sup>283</sup>

The Missouri Synod officials present at the meeting were also initially reluctant to open a mission in Mankato, since it would appear that they were taking advantage of

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been known as a very vocal opponent of military chaplaincy, scouting, and prayer fellowship and had published numerous articles in the Northwestern Lutheran explaining and emphasizing the correct Scriptural stance in regards to these issues. When Norman Madson, Dean of the ELS' Bethany Seminary, heard Fischer had received the call to Immanuel, he personally urged Fischer accept. (David Lau, "The Church of the Lutheran Confession – Fifty Years," *Journal of Theology* 49:3 (September 2009): 9)

Fischer's arrival and the timing of the petitioners requested should not be overlooked. Fischer was much more soundly orthodox in doctrine and practice than the more lax Ackermann. Eventually Fischer would lead Immanuel to suspend fellowship with the WELS in 1956, leading to the formation of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. Fischer's solid line cost him his health and ultimately his life. He needed to take medical sabbaticals and on June 10, 1958, Fischer suffered a massive heart-attack and died. Norman Madson, preaching at Fischer's funeral, remarked, "In the sacristy of that Lübben church you will find a life-sized painting of the faithful confessor [Paul Gerhardt], bearing this inscription in Latin: "THEOLOGUS IN CRIBRO SATANAE VERSATUS." "A theologian who has been sifted in the sieve of Satan." We like to think of our departed brother as one who had also been sifted. But he remained faithful to the end, faithful to the religion of the cross, than which there is none other by which you may be saved." (Lau, 9)

<sup>282</sup> The pastor of the St. Mark's was Martin Birkholz. Birkholz complained to Naumann in letter about the situation in Mankato. In it he complains that Immanuel congregation and Pastor Fischer are openly violating the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment. He cites no proof other than Pastor Fischer's criticism of a synod film called "Africa Still Calls" and the fact that after St. Mark's and many of its members were flooded out by a spring swelling of the Minnesota River, the ladies of Our Savior's were not welcomed in the charity work. Furthermore he states, "As far as I can see, it is my duty to recognize Our Savior's congregation unless I am informed officially by you to the contrary." (Martin Birkholz to Oscar Naumann, Letter, July 2, 1951, Minnesota District Presidential Files – General Correspondence 1948-1953, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, Mequon, WI). Naumann responded, "I am still convinced that Pastor Fischer and his congregation are fighting for the correct biblical principles. I myself would not put as many things into print as they do, but it is a matter of human judgment and when a great deal of rumor and false report is being spread, one feels compelled to bring the correct information to one's people. With regards to some of the other things Pastor Fischer is supposed to have said or done, I wonder whether or brethren are reliably informed...I believe that we should definitely await official action and a peaceful settlement of this matter before we can fully recognize Our Savior's congregation as being in fellowship with us." (Oscar Naumann to Martin Birkholz, letter, December 6, 1951, Minnesota District Presidential Files – General Correspondence 1948-1953, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, Mequon, WI.)

<sup>283</sup> Fischer, Mankato Case.



Immanuel during a difficult time. But the four men persisted. They insisted that their desire for a Missouri Synod mission had been in their minds long before the present difficulties. Mr. Malwitz in particular had already done some ground work for such a mission and gathered a number of names of people who had come to the area who were looking for a Missouri Synod congregation.<sup>284</sup>

But the Wisconsin Synod men were not convinced this was a good idea. First, it violated the longstanding practice in the Synodical Conference to respect a given territory of a particular synod. Pastor Palmer cited a number of examples of how this keeps the synods from competing with each other. Then one of the petitioners, Mr. Meyer, bluntly asked two questions. First, is there any reason not to allow a Missouri Synod mission? Second, are there differences in practice between the Wisconsin and Missouri Synod on certain points, namely scouting and chaplaincy? Pastor Palmer answered “no” to the first and “yes” to the second.

In response, Mr. Meyer made it clear that he did not agree with Wisconsin’s position and he wants his children in Boy Scouts. He further stated that he had several brothers who served in the last war and one of them was lost to the church because there was not a Lutheran chaplain to look after him. He would not belong to a church that is opposed to Lutheran chaplains.<sup>285</sup> Thus, the proverbial cat was out of the bag. The real reason for starting the Missouri Synod mission was so they could have scouting and be aligned with a synod that supported chaplaincy.

President Naumann, along with other Wisconsin Synod and Missouri Synod officials, made it clear that if this was the real issue, then the Missouri Synod could not

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<sup>284</sup> Fischer, Mankato Case.

<sup>285</sup> Fischer, Mankato Case.

come into Mankato, since it would be an opposition congregation and not a sister congregation. From this point it became clear that the Wisconsin Synod officials were reluctant to grant such a request. It also became clear that these four men were going to go ahead with their plan regardless.

This, of course, came as no surprise to Pastor Fischer of Immanuel. Although Pastor Fischer had never raised the issue of Boy Scouts from the pulpit, he had addressed scouting in his catechism class in connection to the first three commandments.<sup>286</sup> After Fischer had done this, Malwitz and Hoyer had resigned as Sunday school teachers (though they would later falsely claim they had been “fired”). Hantelmann had withdrawn his children from the school without giving reason for the action. Meyer, who had petitioned to teach Sunday school, was not approved because of his obvious stand with the others in the proposed Missouri Synod venture. In short, Fischer knew the real motivation for the petition, and since it would violate Scripture to release such men with the congregation’s blessing, he made it clear to President Naumann that he would not consent to a release unless they retracted their statement and promised not to have a Boy Scout troop.<sup>287</sup>

Another meeting was scheduled for December 6, 1949 at Bethany Lutheran College. This time, not only members of the Wisconsin and Missouri Synod were in attendance, but also representatives of the ELS and members of the Bethany College and Seminary faculty. After the preliminaries, the discussion again came toward scouting. Only after Pastor Otto Brauer (LCMS Mission Board President for Minnesota District), and President Hugo Gamber (LCMS District President) assured the Wisconsin Synod that

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<sup>286</sup> Gervasius Fischer to Oscar Naumann, letter, November 10, 1949, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>287</sup> Fischer to Naumann, November 10, 1949.

there would not be any scouting at the mission itself, did the Wisconsin Synod men relent and agree to a release of the four men to this endeavor.<sup>288</sup>

In a letter to President Harstad of the ELS, Naumann explains his continued reluctance about the Missouri venture in Mankato along with his reasoning for allowing it,

It became evident that Missouri would get in, and I would rather see them come in without a long protest and quarrel than to go through what we experienced in New Ulm...

My prayer is that we can settle the difficulties with Missouri soon so we can become more uniform in practice, then people transferring from one synod to another should feel more “at home.”<sup>289</sup>

Naumann’s hopes were not to be realized. The situation was about to go from bad to much, much worse.

At the time Alvin Fehner received the call to the newly formed LCMS mission in Mankato, he was the highly popular pastor at Trinity First Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN. But one Bethany professor in particular, Jacob Preus, saw the selection of Fehner as the new pastor of Our Savior’s with foreboding. Preus and his wife were familiar with Fehner and even enjoyed his preaching.<sup>290</sup> But Preus was equally frightened by reports of Fehner’s liberal fellowship practices. In particular, Fehner had invited Dr. Malmin of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a speaker on a number of different occasions. Preus cites this breach as particularly painful for a number of reasons,

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<sup>288</sup> BW Teigen – Personal Summary of meeting at Bethany Lutheran College, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>289</sup> Oscar Naumann to Adolph Harstad, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1950, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>290</sup> J.A.O. Preus to Alvin Fehner, letter, May 4<sup>th</sup> 1950, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

In addition to the fact that his synod and yours are for Scriptural reason not in church fellowship, in addition to the fact that he himself is guilty of serious doctrinal errors; I am especially sorry to hear of this because of his attitude toward our Norwegian Synod, There is no single man in the ELC who has been more bitter and unfair in his attacks upon our synod than Malmin. He has attacked us not only on personal grounds but also for our stand against the lodge and women's suffrage. His language in his paper has been sarcastic and un-Christian....If Malmin had been in statu confessionis, or even one who wanted to be a true Missourian, I would not feel so strongly on this issue; but there is no one in the ELC who is so completely alien in spirit to the stand of the Synodical Conference as Malmin.<sup>291</sup>

Preus goes on to ask three simple questions: First, is this report true? Second, does Fehner realize that such invitations are contrary to Scripture? Third, will Fehner give his word such acts will not be repeated in Mankato? Fehner's answer to Preus, a scant paragraph, answers all of Preus' questions perfectly,

In answer I would say that I do not feel disposed to elaborate and defend in writing, and at this time, the principles and the policies I have pursued in my ministry at Trinity First. Nor do I make any confession of guilt herewith, neither give you any course of assurance as to the course I intend to follow in my new Mankato parish, other than it shall be in accordance with God's Word, as it was also here at Trinity First.<sup>292</sup>

The boldness of the evasion struck a resounding cord with Preus (who did not participate at the installation). And, sadly, it did not take long for his sense of foreboding of to become a reality.

Between Fehner's installation and December of 1950, Fehner had opened a two front war with Immanuel and the Minnesota District of the WELS on one flank and

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<sup>291</sup> Preus to Fehner.

<sup>292</sup> Alvin Fehner to J.A.O. Preus, letter, May 8, 1950, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

Bethany Lutheran College and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod on the other. The first skirmishes of the “Mankato War” broke out at Immanuel. Even though the original members of Our Savior’s had promised that they would be reaching out to non-Synodical Conference members, their ranks swelled with 180 transfers in the first few months alone. This was to a certain extent expected. All such transfers had been done in good order and with sisterly love, at least on the surface. But all it took for hostilities to commence was one slip at a morning service by Pastor Fischer.

Pastor Adolph Ackermann, the senior pastor at Immanuel, had died early Sunday morning and by service time, many of the members had already known<sup>293</sup>. However, as is

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<sup>293</sup> Adolph Ackermann (1871-1950) had a history of controversy within the Minnesota Synod and later, Minnesota District. Ackermann was a gifted preacher, teacher and administrator and was a professor (1894-1918) and later president of DMLC (1914-1918). But his pro-Germany, anti-draft public comments led to officials of both the church and the state to pressure him into resigning his position. He begrudgingly acquiesced to their request, leaving office with the final words of protest, “*Recht muss Recht bleiben!*” - What is right is right!” (Fredrich, pg 283). Following his resignation, he took a call to a small, dual parish in Essig-Brighton, Minnesota. In 1922, he received a call to serve as pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Mankato, MN.

In 1936 he had been elected as district president of the Minnesota District, and served until 1948, when he was replaced by Oscar Naumann. Following Naumann’s election to the district presidency, Ackermann rebuked the body for not re-electing him and then left the chair and the convention. Naumann’s election was seen by many as a move by the district to take a stronger stand against the LCMS divergence in doctrine and practice, for Ackermann had been considered to have liberal and unionistic tendencies. George Schweikert, in a letter of congratulations to Oscar Naumann on his election, confirms this fact when he writes, “Congratulations on being elected to the presidency of the Minnesota District...I had a few notes on your election that I had planned to insert in the current issue of the Okabena Lutheran, but the space ran out on me too soon. Also, it is rather hard to handle some news. Should I take a crack at Pastor Ackermann? He might use that as further reason for leaving us, i.e., the Conservatives. Anyway, he is out and you are in the office thru which you can do much as a defender of the faith.” (George Schweikert to Oscar Naumann, letter, June 30, 1948, Minnesota District Presidential Files – Ackermann Correspondence, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, Mequon, WI).

The chief complaint of Schweikert and others against Ackermann was his willingness to give in to liberal practice either by ignoring protests or making excuses that glossed over the real issue. For instance, Ackermann, much to the surprise of Pastor Fischer, had allowed a young man to join the church and attend the Lord’s Supper even though he had signed a contract with the local Catholic priest to raise his children Catholic. Even more disturbing was the fact that in the 28 years that Ackermann had been pastor, Immanuel had never excommunicated anyone, but simply dropped names from the church roster. Pastor Gervasius Fischer arrived as the associate pastor of Immanuel in 1949. It seems that from his very arrival, he stood in stark contrast to Ackermann lax attitude toward the divergences in the LCMS. An exasperated Fischer wrote, “Every confessional stand of mine is a widening of the breach. Ackermann stands on the liberal side of the gap and I on the other.” (Gervasius Fisher to Oscar Naumann, letter, December 11, 1949, The Mankato Case Files, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, Mequon, WI). Of wider concern to the other WELS and ELS churches of the Mankato area was Ackermann’s involvement with the Mankato Ministerial

common in the parish ministry, Pastor Fischer had not been made aware before the services and did not make mention of it during the prayers or announcements. The embers that had been smoldering against Fischer for his strong stand against scouting were stoked into blazing fire by this *faux pas*. Soon a petition of removal was being circulated against Pastor Fischer. The council of Immanuel, seeking to end this, proceeded to take action against the petitioners according to Matthew 18, trying to seek a meeting between the petitioners and Fischer, to call them to account of their un-Christian behavior and heal the rift that had been caused. Even when the district officials were brought in to help mediate, the trouble makers attacked Fischer verbally, hissing and booing, and threatening Fischer and others with the fist.<sup>294</sup>

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Association's radio broadcast. The involvement with these heterodox churches in broadcasting religious messages was of great concern to both WELS and ELS officials. WELS Pastor Ross Henzi attributes this allowance for liberal practice by Ackermann to stem from Ackermann's fraternal ties to the Missouri Synod (Ackermann had attended Concordia, St. Louis for his Seminary training).

But Ackermann had a small but vocal and powerful group behind him. Mt. Hantelmann, one of the original petitioners, maintained quite firmly that "there had been no serious trouble at Immanuel in the 28 years that Pastor Ackermann was pastor at Immanuel, but now there was trouble after trouble" (Mankato Case, ELS archives). In a letter to Oscar Naumann, Ackermann's daughter, Mrs. Eleanor Meagher nee Ackermann, writes, "In every shop, in every gathering on every corner, people are talking about the man that is succeeding my father and how he has made miserable a congregation and its pastor. In a town of this size, that is more serious than a metropolitan area, and the pastor must be accepted by the community or the church will die...if your plan is to break my father completely only you and the church will suffer, for his friends are legion." (Mrs. Eleanor Ackermann Meagher to Oscar Naumann, letter, January 24, 1950, Minnesota District Presidential Files – Ackermann Correspondence, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, Mequon, WI). Shortly before his death, Ackermann had told Naumann that he was planning on resigning later that year for the sake of peace in the congregation and the district.

The grudge that Ackermann family and supporters felt toward Naumann, Fischer and the Minnesota District was reflected in the funeral preparations. In the original funeral plans, Naumann and Fischer were purposely left out (although Naumann later he did participate). President W.A. Poehler of Concordia College, St. Paul, delivered Ackermann's funeral address with Rev. E.J. Marxhausen, pastor of LCMS' Immanuel Lutheran Church, Courtland, MN presiding at the liturgy. Timothy Blauert, "Oscar Naumann: A Steadfast Leader in Turbulent Times." Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary On-line Essay File. <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/BlauertLeader.PDF>. (Accessed May 13, 2009); Ross Henzi, "Oscar Naumann 1909-1979 – The Making of a President." WELS Historical Journal volume 15:2, 1997. <http://www.welshistory.org/files/Vol15No2pp03-19.pdf>; Morton Schroeder, "Adolph Ackermann, Chauvinism, and Free Speech." Wisconsin Historical Journal volume 2:2, 1984. <http://www.welshistory.org/files/Vol2No2pp10-18.pdf> (last accessed May 13, 2010).

<sup>294</sup> Intersynodical Relations Committee meeting minutes November 13, 14 1952, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

The trouble makers had then proceeded to attend Our Savior's and were accepted into membership without a transfer, even though many of those who went over were still in the middle of discipline proceedings at Immanuel. And what was Alvin Fehner's response to all of this? Fehner told Fischer flat out that he would accept members with or without transfer. Naumann tried to get a meeting with the Missouri officials to help settle this matter, but Gamber, the LCMS district president, dragged his feet.

The second front of the "Mankato" war was opened at Bethany Lutheran College when Fehner imperiously demanded that all Missouri Synod students be directed to Our Savior's for his ministrations. Such a demand was to say the least out of place. It was common practice that a Synodical Conference college looked after the spiritual welfare of the students attending, regardless which synod the student came. No student was demanded to attend Mount Olive, the ELS church, but was strongly encouraged to attend any of the sister congregations in Mankato. It was not as though the Bethany faculty and administration had any particular trouble with Fehner's request, but more so the manner in which it was done. Fehner had told the administration that if Bethany did not comply with his demands, he would use his influence in the Missouri Synod to cause the Missouri students to withdraw from the college.<sup>295</sup>

But Fehner had tipped his hand to the ELS professors with this brash demand and accompanying threat. During the course of discussion that BLC officials had with Fehner, the topic of the Statement of the Forty-Four came up, which Fehner had defended,

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<sup>295</sup> Report of M.E. Tweit and C.M. Gullerud's meeting with Pastor Alvin Fehner on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1950, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

insisting that there was no false doctrine in it.<sup>296</sup> Fehner's interpretation of Romans 16:17 was also brought into question. Troubled by these demands, threats, and comments supporting "the Statement," the president of Board of Regents of Bethany, Milton Tweit, and the president of the Synod, C.M. Gullerud, called for a meeting with Fehner to discuss these matters more fully.

At the meeting Fehner refused to change his demands, talk any more about Romans 16:17, or meet with the full board to discuss these matters. This troubled both Tweit and Gullerud. Upon further probing, they found that Fehner's strange behavior was the least of their problems. Not only did he fully support the Statement of the Forty-Four, but he contended that this movement was needed in the Missouri Synod and denied Romans 16:17 as it was understood by the old Missouri position.<sup>297</sup>

Things only got worse from there. Not only did Fehner refuse to discuss the matters which were before him, but on his leaving he stated that "no-one this side of heaven would ever reach a point where he would be 100% orthodox."<sup>298</sup> In fundamentals, he said, orthodoxy was possible, but not in non-fundamentals."<sup>299</sup> At the conclusion of the meeting, the Bethany faculty and administration felt they had no other choice but to file a protest with the Minnesota District of the Missouri Synod against Pastor Fehner's behavior and doctrinal statements.

However, Fehner would continue to needle the faculty and interfere with their students well into the fall. By December "Fehner-talk" filled the halls of Bethany, some

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<sup>296</sup> Twelve propositions with comments signed 1945 by 44 LCMS clerics (sometimes called "The Forty-four"). Of most trouble to the ELS and WELS men, *A Statement* declared that Romans 16:16,17 did not apply to the present situation in the Lutheran Church in America and favored selective fellowship.

<sup>297</sup> Tweit/Gullerud Report.

<sup>298</sup> Tweit/Gullerud Report.

<sup>299</sup> Tweit/Gullerud Report.



pro and some con. To make matters worse, a meeting had not been granted by Hugo Gamber, because, according to Gamber, the BLC men needed to officially charge Pastor Fehner with false doctrine. The faculty had already done so, but apparently not with enough force for Gamber. Finally, on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1950, the faculty at Bethany not only drew up specific charges, but also issued a statement to the students at Bethany regarding the Statement of the Forty-Four.

Gamber responded to the charges by scheduling a meeting with the ELS officials as well as Fehner at the Lutheran Student Center in Minneapolis on February 12, 1951. After a review of the events that had led to this meeting, discussion then centered on Fehner's statements of support for the Statement of the Forty-Four. However, little was accomplished or decided. It was agreed that a further meeting was needed. Another meeting was held on March 12, 1951.

At the March 12<sup>th</sup> meeting, some positive headway seemed to be made. During the discussions, Fehner stated that he opposed unionistic services and stated that he now agreed with the interpretation that Romans 16:16, 17 applied to all errorists, both Lutheran and non-Lutheran.<sup>300</sup> However, there was still some issue at the implications of joint prayer and the cooperation in externals. Yet, the mood of the meeting was optimistic.

But the optimism was short-lived. By July of 1951, Fehner was back to his old tricks accepting people into membership at Our Savior's who had not been given a release. Fehner even went so far as conducting funerals of people who had not been given

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<sup>300</sup> Minutes of March 12, 1951 meeting at the Lutheran Student center. ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

a release from membership at Immanuel.<sup>301</sup> During this time District President Naumann officially filed a protest against Our Savior's. However, the protest was rejected by the Minnesota District of the Missouri Synod, and Our Savior's was accepted into official LCMS membership. At the same time, Pastor Fehner's relationship with ELS officials was degrading further. During a December 4<sup>th</sup> discussion with Dean Norman Madson of Bethany Seminary, it became clear that Fehner did not accept the March 12<sup>th</sup> minutes and that his position on Romans 16:16, 17 was again in question. Again, ELS officials pleaded with LCMS District officials to help mediate the matter. But Gamber, as he had done with Naumann and the Immanuel protest, dragged his feet and postponed meeting after meeting.

In August of 1952, the Wisconsin Synod officials again filed a protest against the acceptance of Our Savior's into membership. This time, not only did the Minnesota District of the Missouri Synod reject the protest, but also now accused the Wisconsin Synod of violating fraternal relations and offending against divine order!<sup>302</sup> This was the last straw for the Minnesota District of the Wisconsin Synod. On September 27<sup>th</sup>, President Naumann informed Carl Lawrenz, professor at WLS and the church news editor of the *Northwestern Lutheran*, to insert the following,

Notice:

Members of our Synod are regretfully advised that Our Savior's Lutheran Church of Mankato, Minnesota, heretofore regarded as a sister congregation, has severed the bonds of fraternal relations with us through the violation of Scriptural and Lutheran practices – persisted in despite all admonition and protest – specifically as it pertains to the acceptance of members from a sister

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<sup>301</sup>Gervasius Fischer to Alvin Fehner, letter, July 1, 1951, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>302</sup>Minutes of the 1952 Minnesota District Convention of the LCMS, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

congregation, and that our privilege of fellowship with that congregation must be regarded as suspended.<sup>303</sup>

This announcement set off a firestorm of protest by the LCMS officials not only against the Wisconsin Synod, but also against the ELS officials. Gamber let his disgust with the ELS and WELS be known to B.W. Teigen at the Synodical Conference convention at St. Paul during that same year.<sup>304</sup> Many LCMS officials refused to accept the notice that had been printed. However, it was what Fehner did next that joined the WELS and ELS fronts into a single line.

No sooner had the ink dried of the notice of severance of fellowship with Our Savior's in the *Northwestern Lutheran* than did the *Mankato Free Press* announce on two successive Saturday nights that a Boy Scout Troop would be meeting at Our Savior's. All the initial fears of Immanuel and her pastors, Wisconsin and ELS officials had were now realized. The specific promise made when organizing Our Savior's was not only broken, but broken with brazen panache. To be fair, Fehner was not solely to blame for this gross offense. A hefty portion of the guilt falls upon the shoulders of the founding members of Our Savior's, who went against their word and, at the very least, misled Fehner in what had and had not been promised in regard to the creation of a scout troop at Our Savior's. Still greater guilt must fall upon Otto Brauer, the head of the LCMS District Mission Board, who, having been contacted by Fehner in regards to the Boy Scout issue was misleading in regards to the promises that had been made. Brauer even went so far as to

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<sup>303</sup> Oscar Naumann to Carl Lawrenz, letter, September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1952, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>304</sup> Stuart Dorr to Hugo Gamber, letter, October 1, 1952, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

deny that such a promise had been given, even though every other WELS, ELS, and LCMS official at the 1949 meeting confirmed that such a promise was indeed made.<sup>305</sup>

To add insult to injury, President Gamber, in a letter to Gullerud, went so far as to defend the actions of Our Savior's in starting a Boy Scout troop, citing that this matter has not yet been settled in the Missouri Synod. Gamber completely ignores that it was specifically promised by the members of Our Savior's not to have a Boy Scout troop. Throughout the rest of the year, correspondence shows a backpedaling by Gamber, in an attempt to justify Fehner's actions. ELS President Gullerud hammers Gamber again and again at his total lack of understanding of the Mankato situation. At the same time, the correspondence between Gullerud and Naumann shows just how close the two synods had become as a result of this battle.

The protests (by both ELS and WELS officials) against Our Savior's would continue into 1953. One attempt to mediate the situation took place on July 22, 1953, at Concordia College, St. Paul. In attendance were the Presidia of both Wisconsin and Missouri Minnesota Districts, the pastors and representatives of Immanuel as well as Pastor Fehner and members of Our Savior's. It is of note that during the meeting Pastor Fehner admitted that all the charges that were leveled against him and Our Savior's were true. They further admitted that their action was contrary to numerous Bible passages. Yet, instead of repenting, they justified their actions "according to a higher law, namely the law of love; therefore they would not admit that they had sinned in such disorderly manner of receiving members from a sister congregation, nor would they promise to

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<sup>305</sup> B.W. Teigen to Otto Brauer, letter, January 6, 1954, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

cease such offensive practice.”<sup>306</sup> What was even more disturbing was the fact that this line of argumentation received the support of the Missouri’s Minnesota District Presidium!

But Fehner had one more salvo to make in his Mankato war. In the fall of 1953, he contacted all the LCMS students then attending Bethany by way of letter. In the letter, he not only invited all the students to make Our Savior’s their church home, but also invited the students to share with him personally any statements made against the Missouri Synod by any BLC professor or student,

I regret that there are students at Bethany, and also some faculty members, who make it a point to criticize and fault our Missouri Synod in the presence of our students. They inject doubt into young minds, try to confuse them, and seek to alienate our Missouri Synod students from the Synod to which they belong. When such unwarranted activity comes to your attention, please report it to me; and do not permit yourselves to be influenced by such unholy fault-finding...<sup>307</sup>

This was too much for the faculty both of the college and the seminary to take. As soon as the Fehner letter came to the attention of the faculty of the college and the seminary, it was immediately addressed both in a statement, drafted by B.W. Teigen, read before the faculty and student body as well by a letter to Pastor Fehner drafted by Dean Norman Madson of Bethany Seminary.

The statement drafted by B.W. Teigen, president of Bethany, shows the ELS not only standing up for herself, but also coming to the defense of her larger sister, the WELS. First Teigen rejects the notion that the Bethany College or Seminary faculty has

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<sup>306</sup>George Barthels to the Church Council of Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church, letter, September 1953, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>307</sup> Alvin Fehner to LCMS students attending Bethany Lutheran College, letter, October 1, 1953, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

tried to alienate the students from the Missouri Synod. However, the Immanuel-Bethany-Our Savior's battle had been anything but private, but rather public. When the time came to stand up for the truth of Scripture, the faculty was unhesitating in their duty.

Also, since they shared the same position as the Wisconsin Synod in doctrine and practice, and since the Wisconsin Synod had judged Our Savior's as a heterodox church from both the practice and the doctrine promulgated there, and since the faculty of Bethany had in their own dealings come to the same conclusion, they had no other choice but to also sound a warning against the false teaching of Fehner and the practices that had torn apart the Synodical Conference community in Mankato.

Furthermore, Teigen continued, the fact that there was a publicly organized Boy Scout troop at Our Savior's not only violated the specific promises made to the other churches of Mankato, but was further evidence of the different spirit that was operating at Our Savior's. In summary, Teigen denied the charges leveled against Bethany by evangelically laying before the students all the evidence.

Bethany Seminary Dean Norman Madson's reply to Fehner was much more devastating. Not only does Madson show just how false the charges against Bethany are, but also the un-Christian manner in which Fehner was operating,

Now let us consider, point by point, the seriousness of these charges made, not to us, but at our backs, to students committed to our charge:

- 1.) Are we finding fault with the Missouri Synod when we use in our classes as treasured text books: Walther's "Law and Gospel;" Walther's "Pastoraltheologie;" Pieper's "Dogmatics;" (even defending it over against attacks made upon it by ALC theologians); Koehler's "Summary of Christian Doctrine;" ... The fact that we have to take issue with such claim to be true Missourians, but who do not abide by the Scripture-true

teachings of these revered teachers of the Missouri Synod, can most certainly not be made a just cause for complaint.

- 2.) “Injecting doubt”? Doubt about whom or what?
- 3.) “Trying to confuse”? Can the accuser discern even the intent of the heart?
- 4.) Are we seeking to alienate our students from the teachers whose very text books we not only diligently use, but treasure most highly?
- 5.) “Unwarranted activity”? Zu behaupten ist nicht zu beweisen. The fact that you may deem a thing unwarranted does not make it such. Sweeping statements do not carry much conviction to any person who is concerned about arriving at the actual facts in the case.
- 6.) And then, in violation of the Scripture principle laid down in Lev. 19,17; Matt. 18, 15; Luke 17,3 that a person guilty of trespass like “unholy fault finding” should be rebuked for his sin, our students are urged to become informers, talking to others about the wrong before acquainting the guilty person with his error. Would Christian parents want that sort of counsel given their youth?

And then, in violation of the pledged word given us by your district officials regarding the organization of a congregational Boy Scout troop, you have flaunted before our eyes that very thing...

Where is the evidence to justify your sending (unbeknown to us) letters to our students with such serious charges? Out of deep concern for the truth,

On behalf of the Bethany Theological Faculty,

Norman A. Madson<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>308</sup>Norman Madson to Alvin Fehner, letter, October 1953, Norman Madson Papers Box 3 XXIV.2, Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN. The level of Norman Madson’s disgust with Fehner can be seen in a letter written to J.A.O. Preus July 30, 1954, when he comments, “If we have ‘done dirt by the lily-pure Missourian,’ I for one am willing to make due amends. But if we have not, I don’t want that charge to stand against us. I have seen enough of his [Fehner] pastoral ethics to form my own estimate of the man...I am all for being fair even to the animal with a stripe down his back.” Norman Madson Papers Box 3 XXIV.6. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

Fehner's reply to Madson was as usual, short and polemical, charging Madson and Bethany with the same charges with which they charged him. In a rather infantile, "well so are you" response to Madson, Fehner replies,

...If you don't like my procedure, let me ask you: what words would you use to characterize your action, when behind the backs of the parents, and behind the backs of their pastors, you urged your student-body (and I am particularly concerned here about students from the Missouri Synod), not to attend services in the only Missouri Synod church in Mankato? Write to those parents and pastors, and learn what they have to say about it!<sup>309</sup>

Not only was the charge against Madson untrue (the Bethany Handbook only published the name of Mount Olive as a congregation to which students might attend, omitting all other Synodical Conference churches), but Fehner had been involved in his own letter-writing campaign against Bethany. However, correspondence shows that Fehner was not as clever a propagandist as he considered himself. One of the minds he tried to spin was then Missouri Synod pastor Arnold Kuster, whose son Ted was then attending Bethany (Arnold Kuster would later leave the LCMS for the ELS).

In a letter that Fehner mailed to Kuster is full of half truths and some downright lies. Fehner attacks Preus for his letter of concern and denies that he, Fehner, ever did anything un-Scriptural (He did. It was on record in the ELC publication). He claims the entire Bethany faculty refused to participate in his installation (only Preus refrained). He portrays himself as the meek Missouri Synod pastor humbly requesting the names of the Missouri Synod students. He leaves out the fact he demanded the names with force of threat. Yet, the Fehner letter does have one positive. It shows clearly, from this heterodox

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<sup>309</sup> Alvin Fehner to Norman Madson, letter, October 1953. Norman Madson Papers Box 3 XXIV.5, Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.



pastor's point of view, that both Wisconsin and the ELS are theologically united. Fehner admits to Kuster,

The negotiations of our Synod with the Wisconsin Synod, the Norwegian Synod, are wholly on the side of Wisconsin...According to the Minneapolis Star of Oct. 10, in an article on the Wisconsin Synod's recent Milwaukee convention, "the Rev. C.M. Gullerud of Mankato, Minn., President of the Norwegian Synod, supported the Wisconsin Synod in its controversy with the Missouri Synod. 'It's not a matter of academic debate, but our salvation that's at stake,' he said in an address to the convention. The danger that confronts us is the danger of losing Christ. It's that dangerous.'<sup>310</sup>

The last battle in the Fehner matter would be at Our Savior's Lutheran Church on November 6, 1953. In attendance were Pastors Tweit and Anderson, members of the Bethany Board of Regents, and Pastor Fehner and Mr. Hoyer of Our Savior's. This meeting specifically would address Fehner's recent letter to BLC students and the faculty response. The meeting, again, would underscore just how off track the theology of Fehner was and just how difficult he was to deal with. Time and time again during the meeting, Fehner would make outlandish charges against Bethany. When his charges were shown to be false by documentation, Fehner would either backpedal or change the topic. If Tweit or Anderson asked for the name of the accuser who had given Fehner his information, Fehner would refuse to give the name out of supposed concern not to draw this "friend" into these matters. Tweit comments in his report to the Board of Regents,

The end result of this part of the interview was that, while a long list of incidents of alleged "fault-finding" were referred to, no documentary evidence was submitted to the Board of Regents committee in the form of names, dates, etc., which they had come to secure and had asked for. In

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<sup>310</sup> Alvin Fehner to Arnold Kuster, letter, October 15, 1953. Norman Madson Papers. Box 3. XXIV.3. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

other words, Pastor Fehner was unwilling to substantiate these charges with facts...<sup>311</sup>

When Fehner was pressed specifically about whether or not his actions in sending a letter rather than addressing the people with whom he had issue was in keeping with Matthew 18. He refused to answer. He was asked again. He refused to answer again. He was asked a third time, to which he exploded with the reply, “Oh, I’ve read Matthew 18 more times than you have!”<sup>312</sup>

The final portion of the meeting was perhaps the most telling of how both the ELS and the Wisconsin Synod were becoming viewed by the powers that be in the LCMS. Tweit and Anderson asked how was it that Pastor Fehner considered himself the chaplain to the Missouri Synod students at Bethany. Fehner produced a certification from R.W. Hahn, Executive Secretary of the Student Service Commission of the LCMS, that so entitled Fehner.

The implication was not lost on either Tweit or Anderson. This implied that the LCMS no longer considered the spiritual welfare and instruction of these institutions to be trustworthy or reliable. It also indicated that the Missouri Synod no longer considered Bethany a sister school. Tweit is recorded to have said, “In that case, the Missouri Synod has spoken!”<sup>313</sup> When asked if similar arrangements had been made for Dr. Martin Luther College or Northwestern College or the preparatory schools of the Wisconsin Synod, Fehner replied, as far as he knew, a similar chaplaincy existed.

With the end of that meeting came also the end of contact with Fehner. It is of note that during these years the number of LCMS students at Bethany did rapidly decline.

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<sup>311</sup> Report to the Board of Regents. December 17, 1953. ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

How much of this can be attributed to the Fehner matter is of debate, but one thing is for certain, the presence of Alvin Fehner became a catalyst for the dissolution of fraternal relations with the LCMS, and a closer bonding with the leaders of the WELS and the ELS.

The Fehner Case brought to both ELS and WELS officials a sense of urgency in their dealings with Missouri. Perhaps for the first time, the men who would eventually lead their church bodies out of the Synodical Conference came to realize that their long labor of love toward the Missouri Synod needed, as Werner Franzmann would so eloquently put it, “a stronger kind of admonition and love.” Wisconsin would declare itself *in statu confessionis* in '52 and the ELS would suspend their relations with Missouri in '55. While numerous factors led to these decisions, the Fehner matter was perhaps the straw that broke the camel's back. The minutes of the Intersynodical Relations Committee in the fall of 1952 show that the Fehner matter was not only discussed in full, but it was connected with the decision by the Wisconsin Synod to declare themselves *in statu confessionis* with the Missouri Synod.<sup>314</sup>

Also, the Fehner matter brought together major figures of the WELS and ELS in the fight against Missouri. Naumann, who would later become the president of the Wisconsin Synod, would develop deep ties with the ELS through during the Fehner Case. Later correspondence between Naumann and ELS officials is imbued with brotherly love, trust and joy in the oneness of faith the ELS and the Wisconsin Synod shared. It is also of some importance to see how many of the people caught up in the Fehner matter eventually also were on the Intersynodical Relations Committee. The roster of the

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<sup>314</sup> Intersynodical Relations Committee meeting minutes of November 12-13, 1952. ELS Presidential Files: 1950s – the Fehner Case. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

Intersynodical Relations Committee shows Madson, Tweit, Anderson, Gullerud, and Lillegard from the ELS and as well as Oscar Naumann of the WELS. The Fehner dealings were, to a certain extent, a warm-up for larger battles to be fought on the Synodical Conference scene. When one reads the Intersynodical Relations Committee minutes with the backdrop of the Fehner case in view, it is easy to see why there was so much solidarity on the part of the ELS and WELS in the discussions.

#### IV. The Intersynodical Relations Committee Meetings: 1952-1954

Even during its ugliest moments, the Fehner matter anything but anomalous. When the Missouri Synod officially allowed scouting, situations like the one in Mankato began cropping up at an alarming rate. The Synodical Conference responded to Missouri's new position on scouting, by setting up the Intersynodical Relations Committee (IRC). This committee had been suggested both by President John Brenner of the Wisconsin Synod and LCMS Pastor George Schweikert.<sup>315</sup> The duty of this committee was to "discuss these overtures and the matters contained therein, as well as similar questions that may arise."<sup>316</sup> The committee functioned from 1944-1954, when it was dissolved following the 1954 Synodical Conference convention.

The minutes of the IRC portray the Synodical Conference, as early as 1953, to be a house divided and ripe for collapse. While the issue that originally spawned the committee, scouting, continued to be a thorny subject, the issues of fellowship, joint prayer, and numerous other instances of controversy seem to be added to the docket at an

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<sup>315</sup> Schuetze, *Synodical Conference*, 245. This is the same George Schweikert, pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church, Okabena, WI, who supported also the WELS position on church and ministry, see previous section.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

alarming rate. The water of controversy was coming in faster than the IRC members could bail it out. For instance, at the November 12-13, 1953 meeting of the IRC, five topics were set for discussion, five were remaining from the previous meeting, and by the end of the session, eleven more were added for further discussion.<sup>317</sup>

The minutes of the last five IRC meetings demonstrate the length and breadth of WELS and ELS fraternal bond in four ways: common hermeneutical and exegetical concerns and methodology; a common historical consciousness of the matters being debated; fraternal defenses of each other's synod and individual members of the synod; and the recognition by the opposition within the Missouri and Slovak Synods that the WELS and ELS were one in doctrine and practice.

The WELS and ELS shared biblical hermeneutics is seen immediately. For instance, when discussion of Revised Standard Version (RSV) came up, both in the November '52 meeting and in the April '53 meeting, the objections by both WELS and ELS officials are the same. Both Norman Madson and Edmund Reim make a point about the RSV's transition of *Betulah* as "young woman" rather than "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14.<sup>318</sup> George Lillegard and Edmund Reim again take up the issue in the April '53 session.<sup>319</sup> But greater than any fear about any individual point of translation was the spirit in which the translators of the RSV approached the sacred text of Scripture. The comments of the WELS and ELS officials see the higher-critical spirit of the RSV as one foreign to the

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<sup>317</sup> Minutes of the Intersynodical Relations Committee, November 12-13, 1953, ELS Presidential files: 1950s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives. It should also be noted that very few topics were discussed at this session due to the fact that two members of the committee, Gullerud (ELS) and Voss (WELS), had refused to pray with the LCMS men present to protest their errors. Almost the entire session was devoted to this protest.

<sup>318</sup> Minutes of the Intersynodical Relations Committee, November 13-14, 1952. ELS Presidential Files: 1950s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN, 2.

<sup>319</sup> Minutes of the Intersynodical Relations Committee, April 16-17, 1953. ELS Presidential Files: 1950s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN, 12.

work of a faithful bible translator. Norman Madson declared, “Unless a man is a humble Christian and a believer guided by God’s Word, he cannot translate God’s Word.”<sup>320</sup>

But just how far apart, hermeneutically speaking, were the WELS and ELS officials from the LCMS and Slovak officials at the meeting? In the discussion of the RSV, Drs. Behnken (LCMS) and Rafaj (Slovak) to a great extent concurred with many of the ELS/WELS comments. But the great divide between the WELS-ELS hermeneutical approach and the one that was being employed more and more by the LCMS and Slovak Synod showed itself in the April ’53 session of the IRC. At that meeting two exegeses were prepared for Titus 3:10 - one by Pastor Mazak of the Slovak Synod and one by C.M. Gullerud of the ELS.

According to Mazak, the *haireticos anthropos* that Paul identifies is “antagonistic to and rejects what he formerly accepted. He has revealed himself as a bigoted belligerent errorist.”<sup>321</sup> With this view, Mazak then proceeds to say that Titus 3:10-11 is prescribing discipline and admonition against such a man.<sup>322</sup> However, when Mazak then addresses this passage to the current LCMS-ALC negotiation, he holds that the passage is not applicable for the following reasons:

1. The relation between Missouri and the ALC is not one of fellowship.
2. Missouri is not applying church discipline.
3. It cannot be shown that the ALC has stubbornly and belligerently rejected Missouri’s admonition.<sup>323</sup>

Gullerud, however, disagrees with the exegesis of Mazak and certainly with his application. True, Gullerud admits, foolish arguments are to be avoided and ignored, but

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<sup>320</sup> Minutes of IRC, November 1952, 3.

<sup>321</sup> Minutes of IRC, April 1953, 2.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

where the one advocating them refuses admonition and is disturbing and dividing the church, there one finds a heretic. And, furthermore, this heretic cannot be admonished indefinitely. After one or two admonitions, he is to be rejected. The Gullerud exegesis displays the common WELS/ELS method in approaching a text. Gullerud shows what each key word means etymologically and in the context of the sentence. He compares that to the standard Greek grammar (Kittel), states the simple sense of the passage and then, and only then, does he show that this is the way that the past teachers of the Lutheran Church understood this passage.

The discussion that followed underscored the hermeneutical unity of the WELS and ELS men. Harstad, Lillegard, Madson, Brenner and Reim all line up solidly behind Gullerud's exegesis and its application to the LCMS-ALC discussions. Both the WELS and ELS men apply Titus 3:10 to not simply referring to a heretic or schismatic within a fellowship, but to anyone outside the fellowship, who by his false doctrine, seeks to divide the church. For instance, Adolph Harstad (ELS) stated that he cannot follow the argument of Mazak that the passage cannot be applied to a heretic outside of framework of fellowship. In support of Harstad, John Brenner (WELS) remarks,

Let us remember that Ohio was formerly within and left the Synodical Conference for doctrinal reasons. Missouri [*as a member of the Synodical Conference therefore*] is admonishing the A.L.C. Engelder said, "That's horrible, they must correct that." Harms says they are admonishing and cannot fellowship them because they still have error and hold to it. Reu has said, "If Missouri thinks we will yield in the least point, they are mistaken." I cannot follow Dr. Harms' points at all. We have seen no fruit of admonition at all. The ALC is continuing to fellowship errorists....<sup>324</sup> (Italicized words of explanation mine)

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<sup>324</sup> Minutes of the IRC, April 1953, 4.

Mazak, on the other hand, skirts the obvious implications of the passage. In contrast to the solid exposition and application of Scripture, the Missouri Synod and Slovak Synod representatives, especially Dr. Harms, side step the clear implications of the passage by denying its application to the ALC-LCMS discussions. Harms even went so far as to say that this passage does not apply to the ALC because they “have not held to false doctrine.”<sup>325</sup> Even President Behnken, in the November 1953 session, states that the Missouri Synod cannot apply Titus 3:10 to the ALC because they are not heretics.<sup>326</sup>

A further example the great hermeneutical divide between the synods of the Synodical Conference is in the final session of the IRC held in February, 1954. Here again, Harms (LCMS) justified the continued negotiation with the ALC on a misapplication of Romans 15:30. The following exchange shows just how far apart the approach of the LCMS representatives was from the WELS and ELS,

Harms: We have accepted the doctrinal position: We repudiate unionism that is church fellowship with the adherence of false doctrine, as disobedience to God’s command.” Now this applies to church organizations, not to every individual Lutheran or every individual member of the Methodist church, for example.

Brenner: I studied Dr. Harms’ paper. First I would like to have him show where Scripture makes the distinction between church fellowship and prayer fellowship or joint prayer. I maintain that the Holy Ghost deals with the individual. Second, I challenge the statement that we cannot hold the members of the ALC responsible for the errors of their fathers, while living in the same sins, spreading the same false doctrine, etc. If they are sincere, they should know we cannot pray with them.

Harms: I distinguish between the public congregational administration of the office of the keys and the universal priesthood of each individual Christian.

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<sup>325</sup> Minutes of the IRC, April 1953, 4.

<sup>326</sup> Minutes of the IRC, November 1953, 7.



Reim: challenges Harms' limitation of the exercise of the office of the keys.

Tweit: How do you know a man is a Christian? Must you not judge him by his doctrine and confession?

Harms: What I do not know of a man is whether he is a personal adherent to false doctrine. Therefore, I follow the Scripture: "Him that is weak in faith receive." Romans 15:30.

Voss: This passage refers to a man who is in fellowship but weak in faith. Him I should receive...

Gullerud: You apparently consider prayer fellowship broader than church fellowship. The ALC teaches thus. But we must consider prayer fellowship as one of the various expressions of fellowship.<sup>327</sup>

The minutes of the IRC are filled with such exchanges. Sadly, the LCMS and Slovak representatives were either unwilling to apply the clear meaning of Scripture to the specific situations at hand or plead some constitutional by-law as an exception to the rule. For instance, when the Fehner case was discussed in detail at the November 1952 meeting of the IRC, Dr. Harms not only insinuates that Matthew 5:23, 24 was misapplied when Naumann protested to the Minnesota District of the LCMS, but he questions whether or not the Wisconsin Synod even had the right to protest the voting membership of Our Savior's in Mankato.<sup>328</sup>

Another aspect of WELS and ELS solidarity is their shared historical perspective of the ALC-LCMS union negotiations. The purposeful lack of a historical perspective of had led the Norwegian Synod into the Madison Settlement and had almost led the Wisconsin into fellowship with Ohio and Iowa. Learning from their experiences, the

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<sup>327</sup> Minutes of the IRC, February 25-26, 1954, ELS Presidential Files: 1950s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN. 4.

<sup>328</sup> Minutes of the IRC, November 1952, 9.

WELS and ELS officials demanded that such historical perspective be brought to bear on the ALC-LCMS discussions. For instance, Reim clearly sees the connection between the Madison Settlement and the current discussion between the ELC, ALC and LCMS. He comments,

At Missouri's 1950 convention further treatment of these doctrines was considered necessary only if, for example, the ELC would want to join the Missouri-ALC union, because the Madison Opgjor would have to be settled. We had only the CC [Common Confession], now called Part I, and we could only act on that. We studied it carefully, we found it wanting. Now our finding is rejected and called premature. That does not make sense.<sup>329</sup>

Similarly the ELS officials share the connectedness of the current ALC-LCMS union negotiations and the tragic event that necessitated the creation of their church body.

Gullerud states,

The ALC, Ohio, left the Synodical Conference for reasons of serious false doctrine. They still hold that. They publicly state Missouri's greatest mistake is the rejection of the Madison Agreement. They have stated they are happy in their present relationship and even want to cement their relations more firmly. They have no intention of yielding to Missouri. They state that they will continue to contend for wholesome and allowable latitude of theological opinion; they have vitiated the principle of "Sola Scriptura."<sup>330</sup>

Lillegard even goes so far as to draw a direct line from the current issues that are troubling the Synodical Conference to the Election Controversy.<sup>331</sup>

How did the WELS and ELS arrive at this common historical consciousness?

Here the Wisconsin Synod must give a nod of gratitude in the direction of the ELS.

Already in the 20s, during the Intersynodical Theses, men like Ylvisaker and Hendricks

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<sup>329</sup> Minutes of the IRC, November 1952, 5.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Minutes of the IRC, November 1952, 4.

gave public testimony to the interconnectedness of the current debates with the past. Private testimony was also given by men like Thoen, Anderson, and Gullixson at the joint conferences during the Intersynodical Theses discussion. The ELS had been alert watchmen also throughout the 20s and 30s. The essay *Unity, Union and Unionism* by H.M. Tjernagel put the current union discussions in their proper biblical and historical setting. Similarly, Ylvisaker's history of the ELS, *Grace for Grace*, put the present discussions of the ALC-LCMS in their proper context. Throughout the 1950s, Oscar Naumann and Norman Madson carried on extensive personal correspondence, where Madson showed Naumann that the same time of doctrinal spin that led the Norwegian Synod into merger was being employed by the unionists in the ALC and LCMS. The ELS might have been the smallest member of the Synodical Conference, but they had fought like the Vikings from whom they were descended. They refused to let the unionists blur the doctrinal issues at hand with the omission of the *status controversae* from discussion.<sup>332</sup>

The minutes of the final IRC meetings also show a deep emotional bond between the WELS and ELS officials. At the November 12-13, 1953 session of the IRC, both Arthur Voss (WELS) and C.M. Gullerud (ELS) refuse to pray with the Missouri officials. The reason both men give for refraining is a deeply troubled conscience.<sup>333</sup> LCMS President John Behnken was offended by this action. John Bradac of the Slovak Synod goes so far as to say that Gullerud is required to pray with the members of the IRC. But

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<sup>332</sup> Oscar Naumann to Norman Madson, Letter, July 25, 1959, Oscar Naumann Collection. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mequon, WI. This testimony was not carried out only publicly, but also carried on privately between WELS and ELS leaders. For instance, Norman Madson carried on a correspondence with Oscar Naumann into the late 1950s demonstrating how all the same tricks played to accomplish the Madison Settlement were now happening in the Synodical Conference.

<sup>333</sup> IRC minutes, November 12-13 1953, 2.

the other ELS and WELS officials came to the support of their brothers. Reim responds to Behnken's hurt feelings and Bradac's implication by saying, "If the demand is made that we must continue the normal exercise of fellowship in spite of the deep disturbance of our own conscience, then I must absent myself."<sup>334</sup> In similar fashion Milton Tweit (ELS) replied,

These men have not prayed with me either. I take no offense. I learned my theology from Missouri professors. They taught me, "If a man says, 'there is trouble, therefore let us not pray,' honor such a man." Let us get at the troublesome matters and settle them.<sup>335</sup>

Similar displays of solidarity are found throughout the minutes, from the discussion of the Fehner Case to the ELS' support of the Wisconsin Synod declaration of *in statu confessionis* with the Missouri Synod.

Finally, the IRC minutes make it clear that both LCMS and Slovak Synod officials place both the WELS and ELS in the same theological camp. For instance, during the November 1952 session, an article from the *Lutheran Standard* by Dr. Malmin of the ELC was discussed. In that article, Malmin states that the Wisconsin Synod and the Norwegians are an anchor and a drawback to the Missouri Synod.<sup>336</sup> During the same session, LCMS pastor Otto Brauer's attack made against the WELS and ELS was also brought up for discussion.<sup>337</sup> On the floor of the St. Paul convention of the Synodical Conference, Brauer had accused both the Wisconsin and the Norwegian Synod of

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<sup>334</sup> IRC minutes, November 12-13 1953, 4.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> IRC minutes, November 13-14 1952, 11.

<sup>337</sup> IRC minutes, November 13-14 1952, 12. Brauer was an LCMS pastor in Minnesota as well as chairman of the LCMS Mission Board for that district. He had been involved with the Fehner case and had given Fehner the green light to start a Scout Troop. At that convention, the Norwegians and the Wisconsin officials voted against the Common Confession as a basis for Union Agreement, whereas the Slovak and Missouri voted in favor of it. It was at this point that the Wisconsin Synod began to declare itself *in statu confessionis* with the Missouri Synod.

refusing to accept the Brief Statement and that Wisconsin had refused to join in any union negotiations.<sup>338</sup> In the final analysis, the minutes of the IRC show a rapidly dissolving Synodical Conference clearly divided with the ELS and the Wisconsin Synod on the one side and the LCMS and the Slovak Synod on the other. Increasingly one sees a different spirit and a different theological method used by the LCMS and Slovak representatives while the ELS and the WELS were united both in the appropriation and application of the doctrines that Scripture had clearly set forth. A true spiritual bond had developed between the WELS and the ELS. Strangers had become sisters.

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<sup>338</sup> IRC minutes, November 13-14 1952, 12.

## Conclusion

There is, of course, more that could be discussed concerning the WELS/ELS relations. One could examine the minutes of the Synodical Conference conventions, during these years. One could talk about the ELS suspension of fellowship with the LCMS in 1955 while still continuing in fellowship with the WELS. One could examine the periodicals and essays of this period to an even greater extent.

There is, in addition, much to write about the relations of the WELS/ELS since 1955. One could examine the “Meq-Beth” program, where all the second-career pastors for the WELS received their undergraduate training at Bethany for almost 30 years. There is the Confessional Forum, the formation of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, as well as the formation of the Conference of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. There are the theological disputes such as the moment of presence debate of the late 70s and early 80s, the church and ministry debate that is currently raging within the ELS and the more recent debate over the role of women in the public ministry that is just now beginning to heat up.

But this thesis concludes here for the following reasons. First, there is much more written history about WELS/ELS relations the closer and closer one gets chronologically to the dissolution of the Synodical Conference. Second, to discuss the issues that have affected the WELS/ELS fellowship since 1955 would involve not a thesis, but a multi-volume work in order to adequately state and analyze the issues. Finally, the current debates that are raging within the WELS and the ELS are still too raw to give proper historical analysis. To even attempt to provide such analysis at this time might inadvertently cause additional harm and dissention in the ranks of our blessed fellowship.

Yet, there does remain a present value in studying the early years of WELS and ELS relations. First, the growth of fraternal relations between the WELS and ELS demonstrates ably that true unity is based on a common approach to Scripture. The WELS and ELS fellowship is not based on something as flimsy as a shared cultural heritage or the doctrinal unity our fathers had with each other. The fellowship between the WELS and ELS is first and foremost a living spiritual fellowship based on an active study and application of the Scripture. Consider ELS President Theodore Aaberg's kind and generous words to Oscar Naumann on the eve of the Wisconsin Synod convention where the decision to suspend fellowship with Missouri was finally made,

...we of the ELS are not going to feel that we have been let down or forsaken by the Wisconsin Synod [if they do not withdraw from the Synodical Council at this time]. Our unity and fellowship is made of sterner stuff than that.<sup>339</sup>

This true fellowship is far more satisfying, far dearer, and far stronger than the kind of false fellowships that abound in this age of false ecumenism. Indeed, the study of the relation between the WELS and the ELS is perhaps one of the shining jewels of church history that shows not only can true unity of doctrine and confession exist between sister church bodies of differing history, culture, and size, but that such spiritual unity reveals the absolute irrelevancy of "organic union". More than that, it also reveals that where true spiritual unity exists between sister synods, visible organic union can even hurt the work of the church and blunt her testimony. How would have the Intersynodical Theses turned out for the Wisconsin Synod if the ELS had not waved a bright red flag of warning? How would have the church and ministry debate gone among the ELS had they not listened to the Scriptural testimony of the Wisconsin men? How

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<sup>339</sup> Theodore Aaberg to Oscar Naumann, letter, July 24, 1963, ELS Presidential Files: 1960s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.

would have each synod fared alone against the LCMS-ALC union juggernaut rather than having each other's back in the fight?

Even the leaders of that era saw how blessed they had been not only by their spiritual unity, but by the fact that each had maintained her own identity through the struggle. In a letter from Theodore Aaberg to Oscar Naumann quoted above, Aaberg also addresses a memorial by a congregation of the ELS calls for a merger of the ELS with the WELS. Aaberg wanted Naumann to know that although he does not support the memorial, he does not want that in any way to diminish in Naumann's eyes the high esteem in which he holds the Wisconsin Synod. Naumann replies this way to Aaberg's concern,

You need not be concerned about any adverse reaction to your declining the memorial to merge with our Synod. Our Synod also once declined to be absorbed and, I believe, rightly so...

There are distinct advantages to remaining an organizationally separate body. If we were to merge, we would be one body, standing rather alone confessionally. As it is, we are two sister synods, one in doctrine and confession, mutually encouraging and strengthening one another in our common God-ordained calling. Besides, our people have a fear and dislike for over-organization and that much heralded "efficiency."...

It would, I am sure, be proper and be well received if you in your greeting were to emphasize the unity of faith and confession which makes us one family, not only in the *Una Sancta*, but in the visible church as well.<sup>340</sup>

Keeping a distinctive synodical identity does nothing to diminish the real love and brotherhood that exists between each synod. The Naumann-Aaberg correspondence is proof of that. The pages of their correspondence are not filled alone with dry

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<sup>340</sup> Oscar Naumann to Theodore Aaberg, letter, July 31, 1963, ELS Presidential Files: 1960s. Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mankato, MN.



ecclesiastical details or the weighty doctrinal issues. They are filled with warmth and love that even almost a half century later leave an indelible impression on the reader, so much so that even the most stoic is moved almost to tears with the sincerity of spirit in which they are written.

Perhaps one example of this is correspondence from January of 1965. In the early 60s, Aaberg had been diagnosed with a rare lung disease known as sarcoidosis. The condition was serious enough that Aaberg had to lay down the presidency of the ELS, yet his correspondence with Naumann remained active. In the fall and early winter of 1964, Aaberg's health took a turn for the worse. He wasted away to 156 pounds and was hospitalized. During this time, he received a Christmas letter from Naumann, to which he responded with thanks and shared with him the current state of his health. Naumann responded only a few days later,

Dear Brother Aaberg,

It was indeed good to hear that the Lord spared you during your recent illness and especially that he has granted an improvement to your old ailment. May he speed the day of total restoration of your former state of health.

Is it not wonderful how His strength is made perfect in, and through our weaknesses? I always look forward to your contributions to the Sentinel and am confident that you're day to day preaching and teaching is of the same caliber. For that reason, especially, I pray Him to give you strength and length of days that your gifts may long be employed for the edification of the Church.<sup>341</sup>

It is the prayer of this author that the same kind of loving spirit, born of the Word, might continue to frame all intersynodical dealings between the WELS and ELS.

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<sup>341</sup> Oscar Naumann to Theodore Aaberg, letter, January 12, 1965, Oscar Naumann Collection, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Archives, Mequon, WI.

The WELS/ELS relations of this early period also give a revealing historical context for many of the present debates within the ELS-WELS fellowship as well as demonstrating the proper way of solving them. Today, the doctrine of church and ministry has become a real fight within the ELS and is straining their relationship with the WELS. A number of pastors in the ELS have been suspended or have removed themselves from that fellowship over the 2005 PCM (Presidium's Committee on Ministry) statement that was adopted at the 2005 ELS Synod Convention.

One of the problems with the current debate is that those protesting the PCM statement want to frame the Wisconsin Synod position as a departure from the historic position of the Synodical Conference.<sup>342</sup> Take for instance one ELS pastor's comments,

The following is from the 7th Regular Convention of the Norwegian Synod held at Highland Prairie Lutheran Church, Fillmore County, Minnesota; on June 14-22, 1865. The address is from President H.A. Preus. I put this quotation here so those who claim to be the inheritors of the Old Norwegian Synod's Doctrine can see what was actually believed and taught by the Old Norwegian Synod. The address concerns the adoption of the synod's constitution. For the sake of the congregations the President carefully distinguishes between what is divinely instituted and commanded in contrast with what is done in human freedom and instituted by human freedom.

Does a Synodical President have a divinely instituted and called office simply by virtue of being a Synodical President? The ELS adopted statement in [Part II A](#) says that the President of a Synod is one form of the Pastoral Office: "Missionary, assistant pastor, professor of theology, *synod president (who supervises doctrine in the church)*, and chaplain are some examples of this." Compare what was believed and held by the Old Norwegian Synod concerning the nature of Synod and its authority in the quotations below.<sup>343</sup> (Emphasis mine)

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<sup>342</sup> See the papers of suspended ELS pastor Rolf Preus. <http://www.christforus.org/Papers/preuspapers.html>. (Accessed July 30, 2008).

The study of this era shows that this current debate is not the first time that the ELS wrestled with the “Wisconsin” position. Furthermore, the ELS men like Lillegard the vigorously defended the “Wisconsin” position because, according to their own study, is the correct scriptural position and in agreement with the fathers of the Synodical Conference and the Norwegian Synod. Perhaps a closer study of this era by the ELS would be beneficial in the current debate.

But this era is also a valuable study for the Wisconsin Synod. As in the East Madison Case, sometimes the members of the Wisconsin Synod are guilty of offending her sister by actions that don’t seem to be imbued with a sisterly spirit. Many times groups within the Wisconsin Synod participate in actions that are certainly permissible, but not always beneficial. Many times our synod acts quite imperiously and obliviously toward the concerns and conscience of our sister synod. For instance, time and circumstance might possibly necessitate a woman communing another woman, but why should any congregation actively seek to start a practice that has no real historical basis and, in an age when feminism has confused the roles of man and woman, will only cause more confusion within and between synods? The same also applies to certain worship practices that some WELS churches have adopted wholesale from the Evangelical Movement, which are becoming a greater source of strain between our sister synods.

Indeed, the same call for conscientiousness in dealing with our sister synod that Julius Bergholz made to Abelmann and Thurow needs to be heeded today by many in the WELS. Otherwise, the “smell of that deadly gas” that Tjernagel warned about will begin

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<sup>343</sup> Joe Abrahamson, “The Old Norwegian Synod’s Doctrine on Synod Offices,” published on DIAQKN blog. <http://diatheke.blogspot.com/2007/02/old-norwegian-synods-doctrine-on-synod.html>. (Accessed July 30, 2008).

to fill our fellowship. In short, the intersynodical problems that we face are not always the result of the super-sensitivity of the ELS. Very often they are the result of the insensitivity of the part of members of the WELS. We in the WELS must not take our size as license to say what we want and do what we want. To do so would be to walk down the same unloving path as the LCMS in the waning days of the Synodical Conference, when their own Synodical agenda trumped the pleadings and admonishments of their sister synods.

In closing, one cannot help also to mention that perhaps the greatest benefit of this study is to grow in appreciation of the men, women, pastors and teachers of this era who so bravely gave a confession to the truth despite the earthly loss. After studying the writings and correspondence of this era, the sentiment of Hermann Sasse hits home, “It is always a sign of deep spiritual sickness when a church forgets its fathers. It may criticize them. It must measure their teaching by the Word of God and reject whatever errors they have made as fallible men. But we must not forget them.”<sup>344</sup> May God save us from forgetting the proper biblical hermeneutics that have united and guided ELS and the WELS! May God keep us from forgetting the testimony of the ELS fathers like Harstad, Anderson, Ylvisaker, Levorson, Madson, Tjernagel, Gullixson, Thoen, and Lillegard; or the fathers of the WELS: Pieper, Koehler, Schaller, Meyer, Reim, Brenner, Naumann, and Voss! May the members of each synod always approach Scripture and each other with the same sincerity of spirit, brotherly love and sisterly compassion so that we always remain dear sisters and never become strangers again!

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<sup>344</sup> Hermann Sasse, “Fathers of the Church,” in *The Lonely Way: Selected Letters and Essays of Hermann Sasse Volume II*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 229.

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