

President John Brenner

by John P. Meyer

The deceased was a special gift of God to our Wisconsin Synod in the present times of general confessional weakening. It is well for us to consider this, to thank God for His gift, and to use it to strengthen ourselves in faith and in fidelity to God's Word. We are still too close to the events of Brenner's life to attain a clear and complete overview over the effects of his leadership. That task must be reserved for future historians. Yet a study of Brenner's principles and traits of character, of his special way of confessing the truth and contending for the faith is in place even now as a part of our appreciation of the gift.

A good characterization of the deceased from the pen of Professor Kowalke has been published in *The Northwestern Lutheran* for November 4, 1962. We reprint it here for the readers of the *Quarterly*, adding a few remarks of our own on some details.

"Pastor John Brenner died September 30, 1962, at the age of 88. To most people in the Wisconsin Synod and to pastors in other synods he was best known as the president of the Wisconsin Synod and as chairman at the meetings of the synod and the synodical council. The picture of him that remains with most people who knew him is that of a man who presided at meetings, and he would be judged too in his capacity as an official of the synod. Outside of his St. John's members not many knew him as a pastor, preaching Sunday after Sunday, conducting Bible classes for adults, instructing children and adults for confirmation, attending meetings of the Ladies Aid, and faithfully making his pastoral visits in hospitals and homes. Yet Pastor Brenner was primarily and essentially a pastor, rather than an official.

"He did not desire office, but when he was elected to an office, he accepted it as a duty to the synod and he performed that duty with energy, without neglecting his congregation. He simply put in more hours and never desired to be relieved of his work in the congregation in order to give more time to official duties. His chief interest and purpose in life, whether as pastor or as official, was the preaching of the Gospel and its establishment in the hearts of men as the wisdom of God and the power of God. It was this missionary interest that led him when he was pastor in Cudahy to learn enough of the Slovak language to enable him to preach to the Slovaks in Cudahy, who as yet were without a pastor. He was also among the first of our pastors to urge the necessity of doing mission work among English speaking people, of instructing the young in English in preparation for confirmation, and of holding regular English services besides the German. He was part of the group who urged the publication of a church periodical in English and became a member of the first editorial staff of *The Northwestern Lutheran*, together with J. Jenny, H.K. Moussa, and Fred Graeber. He used the German language as fluently as anyone else in the synod, but if the use of German hindered the free course of the Gospel, then there was no question in his mind but that the German had to give way, much as he cherished the Christian literature that was available only in the German.

"It was his pastoral interest that made him from the beginning a dedicated supporter of Christian education on every level. St. John's school had no future because it was completely surrounded by a rapidly deteriorating neighborhood; yet he clung to it and would not give it up. His sincerity and his deep conviction that Christian education of the young was part of the Church's mission to preach the Gospel carried his congregation with him in support not only of his own parochial school but also in the hard struggle to keep the newly founded Milwaukee Lutheran High School from collapsing from lack of support. St. John's was not a wealthy congregation, but it was never delinquent in its support of its own activities or of those of the synod that had to do with Christian education and missions. Pastor Brenner treated his members as mature Christians, he expected maturity from them, and they responded as mature Christians. There was no wheedling, no mawkish sentimentality, no sensationalism, no display, no resorting to stunts or novelties in his ministry. He preached the Gospel and expected confidently that the Gospel would work the wonders that God had promised. Pastor Brenner was above all a pastor. Toward the end of his life, in the privacy of his family, he said, 'Nobody will ever know how it hurt to have to give up my ministry.' People may have thought of him as President Brenner; he thought of himself as Pastor Brenner.

“He was not a scholar in the sense of being bookish or of probing into obscure mysteries. He did not philosophize or speculate, neither was he inclined to formulate doctrine. He knew his Bible and he knew Lutheran doctrine, and his interest lay more in applying both in a practical way to the life of the congregation, than in extending the boundaries of human knowledge about many things. Mere learning did not at all impress him. His sermons were not deep and learned, but they were full of original thought, and they never failed to apply the truth of Scriptures in a clear and practical way to the daily life of the people before him. To say that he was not a scholar does not imply a lack of knowledge of what was going on in the world, particularly in the churches. He kept himself well informed in current history and had a special gift of placing all things under the searching light of Scriptural truth and judging them from that point of view. He was not much interested in the immediate results of an act or policy, but rather saw such things as part of a whole and judged them by the effect they would have on the life of the Christian and of the Christian congregation in ‘the long run.’

“Pastor Brenner’s interests were concentrated in his congregation and his synod. His reading was confined to what immediately concerned his ministry and to whatever was necessary to keep well informed on what was going on in his own city and country. He read no novels. For relaxation he would read an occasional short story in the old *Saturday Evening Post*. He played no games himself and cared little for games that other people played. He could enjoy fishing if the fish were biting and he had congenial companionship. He did appear once on the Northwestern College campus at a football game, but it is doubtful that he knew which team represented his side, and he soon turned to what was his chief enjoyment—conversation. Sometimes, when he was suffering from what he used to call brainfag, he would drop everything and begin a job of repainting the walls and ceiling of some room in his large parsonage. He preferred to do that late at night.

“In 1933 Pastor Brenner became president of the Wisconsin Synod. That he was chosen for this office surprised no one. When there was a task to be done in the synod that required energy and good judgment, it seemed natural to turn to him. When a man was needed, people had confidence that he would answer the need. He was a member of the first staff of *The Northwestern Lutheran*, was a member of the Northwestern College board, also of the Seminary board, was chosen to represent our synod on the Army-Navy Commission of the Synodical Conference during World War I, was on the Committee on State and Federal Legislation, was chosen to direct the collection of money to liquidate the synod’s debts and to build the new seminary in 1928. He went at each task in a matter-of-fact way, quietly and confidently, without any fuss. It was fortunate for the synod that during the critical years of the depression in the 1930’s he was in the president’s chair. With him as president and Pastors Paul Pieper and L. Koeninger on the Board of Trustees the synod stood up under the financial stress of that difficult period without falling too deeply into debt. It was a period that required tact and good judgment of its leaders, and the synod was fortunate to get just that.

“It was to be expected that a man so forthright and outspoken as John Brenner would step on various toes, and he did step down hard on many toes, but those toes usually belonged to people who had their feet in places where they should not have been. It has been said that he criticized everything. Not everything. But he certainly was critical of whatever pretended to be good but was contrary to the truth of Scripture and hurtful to the church. He was sometimes sharp in his remarks, but that sharpness was provoked by sham, insincerity, ostentation, or any pretended substitute for simple Christian truth. Outspoken he certainly was, but he was evangelical at the same time. There is a good example of that evangelical spirit to be found in the long series of articles that he wrote in *The Northwestern Lutheran* at the time that he was pleading with pastors and congregations to give at least something toward payment of the synod’s debts and toward the building of the seminary. In spite of much provocation and exasperating slowness on the part of some congregations, his articles were wonderfully patient and evangelical in spirit. They still make good reading.

“He was not naturally robust and did not always enjoy the good health that his energy and endurance seemed to indicate. He might begin a day feeling somewhat less than fit for the work at hand, but he seemed to grow stronger as a session dragged on into the night and towards midnight. Nothing escaped him when he was in the chair—with one exception. If the assignment committee happened to meet in the morning after an especially trying midnight session, then he was inclined to sit back, light his pipe, and let the district presidents take over, since this was, after all, their business.

“His sharp tongue, it was sometimes said, aggravated the growing tension between the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods, but it will be noted that he did not force the issue or attempt to press his conviction down the throats of people who had not had the opportunities that had come his way to see in what direction Missouri’s policies were leading that synod. He knew what was bound to come and wanted to have it come as a result of conviction, not as an unwilling surrender to force.

“There were people who neither liked nor admired Pastor Brenner. His direct manner irritated some people. But whether people liked him or not, they all respected him. He was a man and a Christian and a dedicated pastor of the flock of Christ.”

So far *The Northwestern Lutheran*.

It is important to look at the conditions within our Synod during the time that Brenner received his training.

In 1886 he was enrolled in the Freshman Class (Sexta) of the Preparatory Department of Northwestern College in Watertown. He was graduated from the College Department in June 1893, and in September of that year entered our Theological Seminary, which dedicated its new home in Wauwatosa on the day before the opening of the school year. He interrupted his studies in the Seminary for a number of weeks, to help out as instructor in Doctor Martin Luther College, New Ulm. He received his diploma as a Candidate for the Holy Ministry in 1896, and began his service at St. Paul’s in Cudahy.

When Brenner entered Northwestern College it was only a few years after our Synod and the Synodical Conference had gone through the throes of the Election controversy. That controversy made people much aware of the importance of pure doctrine. We mention particularly two things. In the controversy the question often turned about some ecclesiastical terms, chief among which was the *Intuitus Fidei*. Others were “natural” and “willful” (malicious) resistance, and “decision.”

To take up the last named first, it is true that in the process of conversion a decision takes place in the heart of the sinner. It may be a decision *for* Christ or *against* Christ. Yet when a decision for Christ is reached, it was the Holy Ghost alone who brought it about; and when a decision against Christ is made it was the sinner’s own fault alone, who blocked the operation of the Spirit. The efforts of the Holy Ghost were equally serious and efficacious in both cases; but the sinner “would not” and resisted the Holy Ghost.

May it then be said that the resistance offered by the sinner is of such a type and nature that the Holy Ghost can not overcome? The expressions “natural” and “willful” resistances were coined to denote varying degrees of resistance. While it is true that Scripture traces a sinner’s decision against Christ to his willful resistance and faults him for his unbelief, yet Scripture never says that there is a type of resistance, which as such the Holy Ghost cannot overcome. St. Paul, e.g., offered most fierce resistance for a long time; yet the Holy Ghost rescued him and led him to a fervent decision for Christ.

The phrase *intuitu fidei* may be used without synergistic connotation, as it actually occurs in Dr. Walther’s *Lehre und Wehre* (before the election controversy). It may be used to emphasize the presence of faith in the very doctrine of election itself over against the Calvinistic theory of an absolute predestination, consisting of a nude decree for eternal life of the ones and for eternal damnation of the others. But it is difficult to keep it on that level; for actually the phrase does more: it assigns to faith a place *before* election, as becomes especially evident in the synonymous phrase *ex praevisa fide*, a phrase which assigns to faith the function of a cause, perhaps not a motivating but only an explanatory cause, nevertheless a cause of some sort, for God’s decree of election. Thus from a relatively innocuous phrase it is turned into a dangerous perversion of the truth when it is used to answer the question *Cur alii prae aliis?*

In the controversy our fathers had become aware that church formulations may be convenient to express some truth to a certain extent, but must always be used with care, and must be discarded if they open the door for error and are used to express an error. All doctrine must be drawn from the Scriptures. Scripture is the only legitimate source and the final judge of all doctrine, to which also all ecclesiastical formulations must yield.

When Brenner entered Northwestern, this spirit, this awareness of the necessity of pure doctrine, based on the Scriptures alone, was very active in our Synod. This does not mean that the term “pure doctrine” was heard very extensively by the members, as was the case in some other circles—rather, a use of the term as a

slogan or catchword was frowned on—but appreciation of pure doctrine was deep-rooted in men's heart and mind and dominated all conduct.

In this atmosphere Brenner received his training.

We must mention another fact.

Northwestern College at that time stood under the leadership of Dr. A.F. Ernst. He had reorganized the school after the order of a German humanistic *Gymnasium*. Since our congregations, who were to be supplied with pastors, consisted almost exclusively of German immigrants, the chief language of the college was German. German was the medium of instruction in the majority of courses; also German literature and German history were stressed.

Northwestern College was to be a pre-theological school, but not in the narrow technical sense. It was a principle of Dr. Ernst that the study of theology should be undertaken on a broad cultural basis, which he tried to provide in the college. He stressed the humanities and the Greek and Latin languages and literature. To illustrate, professors of the University in Madison were astonished when students coming from Watertown were able to recite lengthy passages from Latin authors, and knew more than just the opening sentence of the first book of Caesar's commentaries on his Gallic campaigns.

Another case: The Commencement Day program under Dr. Ernst offered three orations by graduates, one in English, one in German, and one in Latin. The German oration was the most important. The man who delivered it was also the class valedictorian. But there had to be also a Latin oration. No commencement program was complete without it.

In the year when Brenner was graduated (1893) the Columbian Exposition was held in Chicago in commemoration (a year later) of the four-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America. There was very much discussion in those days about the view which people held before Columbus regarding the shape of the earth; and that it took exceptional courage on the part of Columbus when, on the theory that the earth is round, he sailed west to reach the East Indies. Dr. Ernst took his clue from this in assigning the theme for the Latin oration. It was the question: *Quid antiqui illi de forma et figura terrae iudicaverint?*

While there was a considerable question in that year as to whom the German and the Latin orations were to be assigned, there was no question about the English oration. Brenner was the man. He had the best command in the class of the English language. And while his delivery was not marked by polished oratory, his speech was easily the most impressive of the day.

Though Brenner devoted most of his efforts to the English language, he did not neglect his other studies. We remarked before that Dr. Ernst considered Latin and Greek as highly important in the training of a pastor for their general cultural value. When Brenner's class reached the stage of reading Greek poetry, Brenner, during the summer recess, devoted his leisure time to reading sections of Homer in the original.

We add another example to show how Dr. Ernst stressed the study of the ancient classics. If any of the students questioned the necessity of such study with the argument that it contributed nothing to the work in the Church and added nothing to the professional equipment of a pastor, Dr. Ernst would fling the remark at him: *Sie sind ein Banausiker*. By using that form of the word he went beyond the common form, *ein Banause*, and occasionally he would add the Greek word ἀνήρ βαναυσικός.

This was the atmosphere in which Brenner received his education and training.

Brenner, with others of his age group, foresaw the growing need of English in our churches. The lectures in the Theological Seminary were all given in German. Then Brenner together with fellow students organized an English theological debating society in the dormitory. One of the chief purposes of the society was to familiarize the members with English theological terminology. At the meetings, which were held monthly, one member would read an (original) essay on some theological subject, while two teams debated some theological problem. This was then followed by a general discussion.

Little has to be added to Prof. Kowalke's evaluation of Brenner's work in the ministry. Just a few remarks on the training the Lord provided in preparing him for the future presidency of the Synod.

Brenner's interests in the kingdom of God always went beyond the confines of the local congregation. When the Synod decided to publish an English church paper and appointed Brenner as one of its editors, his

horizon was automatically widened by the work of this position. The spirit in which he did his work may be seen from the very first article that he contributed to *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. I, No.1. It addressed itself to the elders of congregations: “Do not forget that your congregation stands in close relation to others in our Synod body.”—But a little more of this later on.

The Protes’tant movement in our Synod, beginning in the mid-twenties, grieved Brenner deeply. He appreciated highly the special gift that God had given to our Synod and our Seminary in the person of Professor J. Ph. Koehler with his outstanding talents and insights. When a man, after the disturbance had begun, tried to ridicule Koehler, Brenner told him: “You have very much to learn yet from that man.” But he also saw that a one-sided stress on a certain method of procedure coupled with an unwillingness to bear with certain weaknesses and shortcomings and to work patiently for a correction of the faults, could lead only to distortions and confusion.

Brenner had a well-developed sense of propriety, and violations of propriety displeased him. But he strove; no matter how provoking a situation might be, not to be influenced by his feelings, but to continue to treat the difficulty as objectively as possible. To illustrate, in 1935 the American Lutheran Church sent out to other Lutheran church bodies an invitation to meet for doctrinal discussions. When our Synod did not receive such invitation to participate, we assumed that likely the letter had been lost in the mail. A few years later, in a general meeting, a prominent member of the Missouri Synod publicly faulted the Wisconsin Synod for having ignored the invitation. When Brenner arose to explain that we had never received the invitation, sounds of disapprobation were heard from a certain section of the hall, which impressed the undersigned as an insipid display of vulgarity. But Brenner did not show any resentment; he continued to explain that a person should not be charged with a fault for not accepting an invitation, which he had never received.* By the way, at the recent convention of the Synodical Conference Dr. Behnken acknowledged the fact that said invitation had not been sent to the Wisconsin Synod.

Whether Brenner was aware of it or not, he always acted according to the principle which he together with his mates, at the suggestion of Dr. Ernst, had adopted as class motto in 1893—Latin, of course—*Praesens imperfectum, futurum perfectum*. We must remember that the present is always burdened with imperfections. Perfection is an ideal for which we must strive untiringly, but the attaining of which has been reserved for the future. In the words of Luther, as long as we are on earth, there is not a *Wesen* but a *Werden*.—Brenner was firm, but he would not force an issue—as long as there was hope for improvement.

We had Brenner as president at a very critical period in the history of our Synod. His general qualifications for the office have been set forth in Prof. Kowalke’s evaluation above. We take a brief glance at the effect that his editorship of the *Northwestern Lutheran* had on his qualification for the presidency. As editor he carefully read the exchanges that came to his desk. In this way he gathered much information and acquired a good overview over events, conditions, trends in other church bodies, especially over developments within the Lutheran churches of this country. Such knowledge is very helpful to an official who is to represent his own church, and who has to make decisions and take action. We find, e.g., that overseas theologians often have difficulty in understanding our action, because they lack sufficient contact with events, currents and counter-currents in the life of the American churches. They should not be blamed for this, seeing they are so far removed from the scene. It is difficult to overcome this handicap. By reading the exchanges regularly as editor of *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Brenner succeeded in reaching a close contact with the other churches, a fact that stood him in good stead when he became president.

In this way he also came as close as is humanly possible to that intangible, elusive something that we may call the “spirit” of a church body. He, so to say, learned to feel what lay behind some movement and where it might lead. Although such “feeling” is not sufficient ground for action, it greatly helps a man to size up a situation more quickly and preserves him from being taken by surprise.

* Representatives of the American Lutheran Church at a subsequent meeting with our Church Union Committee frankly admitted that in 1935 they had not sent an invitation to the Wisconsin Synod.

We thank God for the blessings He granted our Synod through the services of our departed President Brenner.