

An Overview of the Wisconsin Synod's Steps Towards Confessionalism 1850-1868

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“Just put one foot in front of the other, and soon you’ll be walking ‘cross the floor. Just put one foot in front of the other, and soon you’ll be walking out the door.” These words from a song in the Christmas special *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* remind us that it takes many small steps to make progress. The old, wintry warlock of the North had to learn to walk after he lost his magical powers because Kris Kringal melted his icy heart with the gift of a choo-choo train. Yet step by step, with one foot in front of the other, he learned.

By the time the Wisconsin Synod was founded in 1850, Lutheranism was old. It had been around for over three hundred years. In many ways it had grown decrepit in its motherland, Germany. Since 1817, the Kaiser [King of Prussia] had tried to enforce a union between the Lutherans and the Reformed. Although some protested and refused, most submitted. During these years faithfulness to the Lutheran Confessions dwindled. Despite the weakening of the clear gospel call, the Holy Spirit worked through the truth that remained to lead some to desire to spread the message of salvation in Christ. Mission societies were founded. Most of these sought to train both Lutheran and Reformed missionaries. These societies had many of the symptoms and problems of aging Lutheranism, which had fallen away from the Confessions.

The men that formed the Wisconsin Synod came from these societies. They brought along with them many of the old problems which infected European Lutheranism. Yet it was a brave new world in America: No state institution to rely on, money shortages, pastor shortages, travel difficulties, competition with different church bodies. The new synod would have to learn to walk all over again. Where would they walk to? Would they walk toward the door of unionism or toward the door of confessionalism?

Anticipating the conclusion, we find the Wisconsin Synod at the door of confessionalism in 1868. In a meeting on October 22, 1868, between Wisconsin Synod officials and Missouri Synod official, they declared, “Both synods recognize each other as orthodox Lutheran church bodies.”¹ Missouri had been the bastion of confessionalism, and now they recognized that Wisconsin was confessional as well.

This paper wants to focus on an overview of how the Wisconsin Synod got from where it was in 1850 to where it arrived by 1868. What steps did it take? How did it put one foot in front of the other? To help us view the synod’s steps, we will look at the synod’s relationships with others and within itself. As we watch its motion toward or away from other Lutheran groups as well as the internal dynamics between members of the synod, we may gain a sense of how the Lord brought the synod to the confessional stand it had in 1868. We will watch each relationship develop from its beginning until 1868. Consequently, the chronology will jump back and forth.

THE STARTING POINT

Before we look at how the Wisconsin Synod arrived at confessionalism, we need to look at where it started from. Where was its doctrinal and confessional stand in 1850? The character of the synod’s founder and first president, John Muehlhaeuser, greatly influenced the synod’s starting point. He was the one that, at the preliminary meeting on December 8, 1849, William Wrede and John Weinmann entrusted “to write a constitution which would embody the confessions of the synod.”²

¹ John Phipipp Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, Sauk Rapids: Faith-Life Protes’tant Conference, 1981, p. 129, quoting the report of this committee as recorded in the 1869 synodical minutes.

² “Proceedings of 1849, 1850, 1851,” Arnold O. Lehmann, Trans., *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, vol. 9, no. 1&2, p.3.

Muehlhaeuser was born in 1803 at Notzingen, Wuerttemberg in Germany. He learned a trade either as a shoemaker or as a baker³ but desired “to devote himself to the service of the Lord, if the Lord so wills.”⁴ Soon he entered Basel’s Christian young men’s society, and in 1829 he was sent to Austria to do mission work. By 1835 he had returned and entered the Barmen mission society. In 1837 the Langenberg Society sent him to New York. This progression of events gave Muehlhaeuser very few years of formal training. In addition, what training he did receive could hardly be called confessional Lutheranism. The Langenberg Society, which sent him out, “expressly stipulated that the missionaries of the society were to remain unrestricted as to their Reformed or Lutheran or united-evangelical confession.”⁵ Muehlhaeuser had the desire to serve his Lord but did not have the training to be a confessional Lutheran.

In New York City Muehlhaeuser tried his best to teach the German children as well as collect for the poor and look after their physical well-being.⁶ Yet there was resistance to the school and a greater need inland. So the New York Ministerium licensed him and sent him to Rochester, New York. The congregation there was split between Reformed and Lutheran. Over the next ten years Muehlhaeuser healed the split, and the congregation began to grow. His time in New York illustrates Muehlhaeuser’s large heart for people in need and his weakness in confessional Lutheranism, since he apparently managed some sort of compromise between the Reformed and the Lutherans in Rochester.

In 1848 Muehlhaeuser left Rochester and arrived in Milwaukee on June 27, at Weinmann’s request for help. Weinmann and Wrede had been sent out by the Langenberg Society and were doing work among the German Lutherans in Wisconsin. These were the three founders of the Wisconsin Synod. Weinmann left for Baltimore in 1853, and Wrede also left after a short time, returning to Germany. Due to his permanency and his position of synod president, Muehlhaeuser’s character, more so than the other two’s, determined the early course of the synod. As Muehlhaeuser acted with a big heart but with little confessional understanding, so also the synod at first drifted confessionally.

One case that illustrates this is Muehlhaeuser’s dealing with Gotthilf Weitbrecht from 1852 to 1854. He had been connected to the Union church in America (*Evangelischer Verein des Westens*). In 1852 Muehlhaeuser sent him to Sheboygan as a pastor, where he soon joined the Methodists.⁷

A couple excerpts from a letter Muehlhaeuser wrote to Weitbrecht in November 1853 concerning his turn toward Methodism reveal Muehlhaeuser’s heart for people and his attitude toward the confessions:

Just because I am not strictly (Lutheran) or Old-Lutheran, I am in a position to offer every child of God and servant of Christ the hand of fellowship over the ecclesiastical fence ... As a non-theologian [*sic*] I am wondering how a theologian, pledged to the confessional book, could take the step without a struggle.... The Methodist preachers mostly have been recruited for the ministry from the trades, like myself; with this difference that they have no scholastic training at all, whereas I by the grace of the Lord received at least enough theological education to realize how little I know.⁸

This was not the last word on Weitbrecht. He soon fell on hard times and came back to Muehlhaeuser looking for help. From the Proceeding of 1854, we again see Muehlhaeuser’s large heart.

³ Koehler, p. 22.

⁴ Koehler, p. 22, quoting a letter of J. Weitbrecht to Muehlhaeuser, April 12, 1827.

⁵ Koehler, p. 28.

⁶ Koehler, p. 34.

⁷ Koehler, p. 43.

⁸ Koehler, pp. 43-44, quoting Muehlhaeuser’s reply of Nov. 1853 to Weitbrecht.

“Er [Weitbrecht] stand in der groessten Armut, reiste nach Milwaukee, bat P. Muehlhauser um Verzeihung wegen allem, was er seinem bruderlichen Herzen angetan haste. (Traenen) ... P. Muehlhaeuser sandte ihn nach Port Washington, wo er zweimal predigte.”⁹

He [Weitbrecht] was in the greatest poverty. He traveled to Milwaukee, and asked Pastor Muehlhaeuser for forgiveness because of all which he had done to his brotherly heart. (Tears) Pastor Muehlhaeuser sent him to Port Washington, where he preached twice.

His love and concern led Muehlhaeuser to allow someone to preach who seemed inclined to hop back and forth between Lutheranism and Methodism. This may have seemed the loving thing to do, but one wonders whether it shows a lack of love for true doctrine as expressed in the Confessions.

Muehlhaeuser’s dealings with Weitbrecht show his concerned and generous heart that would help out a person in need any way he could, even if it went against good confessional, Lutheran practice. On the other hand, Muehlhaeuser wasn’t overtly hostile to the Confessions. His letter to Weitbrecht seems to indicate that he thought that loyalty to the Confessions should have kept Weitbrecht away from Methodism. For even though Muehlhaeuser was not totally committed to the Confessions, he was not in favor of unionism either. He did not want his pastors jumping back and forth from Lutheranism to Methodism as if there were no differences. Overall, Muehlhaeuser’s failures to adhere to the Confessions stemmed more from ignorance about them rather than from animosity toward them. He recognized his lack of training and appeared to have been willing to let more able men have their say. However, his lack of strict confessionalism did not mean a lack of love for God’s Word. At the first synod convention it was resolved that the preachers take an interest “in conducting day schools, Bible study classes, mission classes, etc.”¹⁰ They also discussed the neglect of home devotions in many families and urged that family altars be established.”¹¹

This was where the Wisconsin Synod started from on its journey to confessionalism. It had a Lutheran heart which sought out lost souls and loved God’s Word, but it did not have a Lutheran mind which recognized that the Confessions beautifully proclaim the gospel truth of Scripture. The Wisconsin Synod saw the apparent harshness of the Old-Lutherans like the Missouri Synod, who followed the Confessions, and determined that such harshness could not be a part of Christian living. Therefore Wisconsin concluded that strong adherence to the Confessions was not the best thing. As a result the synod tended to practice poor fellowship principles, but for the most part avoided unionism which ignored all differences between the Lutherans and the Reformed. Yet many in the synod recognized that they did not have a thorough theological training. So there was also a willingness to be taught, a willingness which allowed better trained men to guide the synod into the Confessions.

Before moving on from the starting point, we need to take a brief look at the constitution of the synod. If Muehlhaeuser was the key man, the constitution would be the key document. At first the constitution appears to be more soundly confessional than what we have seen so far. In regard to the congregations it says that “everything should be in keeping with the true Word of the Bible and the confessions of our Evangelical Lutheran church.”¹² In regard to ordaining candidates it says that “at ordination every candidate is pledged to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and the rest of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church’s confessions.”¹³ Even preachers ordained through another ministerium needed to give a right and good confession before they were received into membership.¹⁴ Yet this all sounds more confessional than it actually turned out in practice.

⁹ “Synodalversammlung vom 11. Juni bis 14., 1854, in der Gemeinde Granville, Milwaukee Co.” *Berichte der Wisconsin Synod, 1859-1876*. Wisconsin Lutheran seminary Library, Wisconsin. p. 29.

¹⁰ “Proceedings 1849, 1850, 1851,” p. 5.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Koehler, p. 41, quoting the Wis. Syn. Const. chap. 5, par. 3.

¹³ Koehler, p. 41, quoting Wis. Syn. Const. chap. 6, par. 9. (Koehler refers to it as par. 10)

¹⁴ “Statuten der evangelical-lutheraner Synode von Wisconsin.” *Berichte der Wisconsin Synod, 1850-1876*. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library, Mequon, Wisconsin. chap. 5. par 11.

John Philipp Koehler attributes the confessional stand in the constitution to the efforts of Weinmann and Wrede.¹⁵ Although they may have had the votes to pass it, Muehlhaeuser's practice as president was more influential on the character of the synod at the start. As we saw in the case of Weitbrecht, Muehlhaeuser would sanction pastors whose right and good confession was not necessarily solidly confessional. In fact, John Bading personally told J. P. Koehler that at his installation in 1854, Muehlhaeuser did not want to pledge Bading to the Confessions which he called "paper fences." Only after Bading demanded to be pledged to the confessions, did Muehlhaeuser finally concede.¹⁶ Although the constitution planted ideas of confessionalism, Muehlhaeuser's character, which was weak toward the Confessions, dominated the starting point of the synod.

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GERMAN MISSIONSION SOCIETIES

As we look at the relationships the Wisconsin Synod had with other groups, we will begin to see the steps it took toward confessionalism. Where better to begin than with that group which more than any other mothered and nursed the Wisconsin Synod along? Yet they were also the ones who were pulling the Wisconsin Synod away from strong confessionalism. These are the German mission societies, in particular Barmen. The Langenberg Society sent out the men trained at Barmen. We noted above that these were in favor of the German union of Lutherans and Reformed. How did their relationship with the Wisconsin Synod change over time?

The synod depended heavily on Langenberg for men and money. The vast majority of pastors in the synod were sent out by Langenberg, and later the Berlin society sent pastors over as well.¹⁷ As for financial assistance, the societies of Berlin and Langenberg supplied a library¹⁸ and a traveling missionary.¹⁹ When Muehlhaeuser took his trip to Germany in 1862, they helped him in encouraging young pastors to go to America.²⁰ Likewise they helped Bading on his seminary fund raising trip in 1863.²¹ These actions not only created a physical bond of money and men but also an emotional bond of gratitude and thankfulness. These early years would have been much more difficult, if not impossible, for the Wisconsin Synod if it had not been for the help of these unionistic societies.

Even though these societies were unionistic, some of the inclination toward confessionalism may have come through them. From 1848 to 1857 Johann Christian Wallmann was the Inspector at Barmen. He was trained at Halle and came under the gospel-centered influence of August Tholuck. He also studied the Lutheran dogmaticians, devotional literature and hymnbook as well.²² In fact, Wallmann's confessional leanings caused some misgivings on the presiding board of the mission society. One of the members of that board wrote him

We have become fond of you, dear Lutheran, and would like to have you with us.... The main difficulty is your confessionalism, and that, we think, you ought to abandon somewhat, whether you come or not.²³

Although Wallmann in no way made Barmen Lutheran much less strongly confessional, I believe that his influence helped make the men sent to the Wisconsin Synod more open to the idea of confessionalism. He may not have inspired a love for the Confession in most of his students, but he did not create a hostility toward

¹⁵ Koehler, p. 41.

¹⁶ Koehler, p. 45.

¹⁷ Koehler, p. 65.

¹⁸ "Proceedings of the Eleventh Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin held in the church of Watertown and Vicinity, Wisconsin from May 25 to 31, 1861 A.D." Arnold O. Lehmann, trans. *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. vol. 13, no. 2. October 1995, p. 16.

¹⁹ Koehler, p. 77.

²⁰ Koehler, p. 87.

²¹ Koehler, p. 91.

²² Koehler, p. 47.

²³ Koehler, p. 47, quoting a letter from pastor J. Keetmann of Elberfeld to Wallmann, dated September 25, 1847.

confessionalism either. In fact, Christian Philipp Koehler, who would urge the Wisconsin Synod toward the Confessions, was one of his students at Barmen.²⁴

It was C. P. Koehler who questioned the rightness of the mission societies supporting the traveling missionary in Wisconsin. In a letter to Muehlhaeuser in 1859 he wrote, “For one, I do not believe that a missionary employed by a *unionistic* society can work in agreement with a *Lutheran* synod.”²⁵ This may well be the beginning of the questions concerning Wisconsin’s relationship with the German mission societies. Let’s see how Wisconsin stepped away from them and their unionistic influence.

Reports of a growing confessionalism and anti-unionistic attitude in Wisconsin reached the mission societies, and they did not like it. For example, the cleric of the Langenberg Society (Meyeringh 1853-1862)²⁶ expressed his concern in a letter to Muehlhaeuser in 1860 that “Lutheran is being fostered too strongly”²⁷ by some in the Wisconsin Synod among whom he names C. P. Koehler. Although the mission societies had a growing concern, no real problems arose at this time, but the ground work was laid.

Things began to heat up again in 1863. Reports had reached Germany that the Wisconsin Synod was forbidding its pastors to supply Word and Sacrament to a union congregation even in cases of emergency. Eichler, the secretary of the Berlin Society, brought this matter before President Bading in a letter, in which he also warned, “It is really necessary—even in your Synod’s vital interest, that a little damper be placed on the pro-Missouri spirit, that of late is so noticeably astir in your Synod, in favor of a mild evangelical Lutheranism.”²⁸ The tension continued in 1864 when a letter from the Langenberg Society to the Wisconsin Synod raised similar concerns that Wisconsin

would more and more abandon its former milder practice over against the Reformed and the United, in order to maintain an exclusively Lutheran stand, which would also necessitate a change in the relation to our United society.²⁹

The Wisconsin Synod was taking steps towards confessionalism, steps which made the mission societies wary. We will look at some of these steps later when we view the internal relationships within Wisconsin. Now, though, we want to continue to see how Wisconsin’s relation with the mission societies changed.

Would Wisconsin back down because of the risk of losing support from Europe or would it continue placing one foot in front of the other towards confessionalism? Adolf Hoenecke wrote the Synod’s response to the societies, and he stood on the confessions. His confessionalism clearly comes forward when he writes,

We on our part cannot accept as satisfactory to have ... the term Lutheran exclusivism applied, when the confession of the Synod actually asserts itself as a potent and governing factor in its organism, as a norm of its life and dealing at home and abroad. For no other way can we or do we wish to conceive of the confessions of our church. We consider them, and that *because* in their same great clearness and simplicity they are a precise expression of all Bible truth, an authority to which we bow willingly and with faith, an authority that will not be gainsaid in its claim to direct and determine the actions of the Synod, so that it cannot readily be pushed aside for any consideration whatever.³⁰

²⁴ Koehler, p. 74.

²⁵ Koehler, p. 63, quoting a letter from Koehler to Muehlhaeuser, dated July 24, 1859.

²⁶ Koehler, p. 28.

²⁷ Koehler, p. 77, quoting a letter from Meyeringh to Muehlhaeuser, dated October 13, 1860.

²⁸ Koehler, p. 92, quoting a letter from Eichler to Bading, dated October 23, 1863.

²⁹ Koehler, p. 100, quoting a letter from the Langenberg society to the Wisconsin Synod, dated July 3, 1864.

³⁰ Koehler, p. 102, quoting the draft of the letter that Wisconsin Synod officials sent to the Langenberg society in response to their letter of July 3, 1864.

Hoenecke tried to walk the fine line between sticking with the Confessions while avoiding the legalistic exclusivism that showed a lack of love.

In the year that followed, reports that reached the mission societies indicated to them that exclusivism and lovelessness were ever increasing in the practice of Wisconsin because of its growing confessionalism. Wisconsin Synod's president, Gottlieb Reim, had Hoenecke write an appeasement letter to counteract this report.³¹ For the time being things quieted again, until 1867 and 1868. These were the last straws that clearly showed that the Wisconsin Synod was confessional and could no longer depend on the mission societies.

The minority report which the 1867 synod convention adopted stated that "we condemn all doctrinal union."³² They tried to rationalize their association with the unionistic mission societies by appealing to the fact that there might be confessional Lutherans within them who want to see the government enforced union dissolved. I think that this desire to keep the ties was not only because of financial and man-power interests but also because of the debt of gratitude and appreciation which Wisconsin recognized that it owed the mission societies for help in the past. Nevertheless, this attempt to sit on the fence failed.

The mission societies protested Wisconsin's strong stand and resented the implication that there were Lutherans within their society who protested the Union. Pastor Schuermann of Langenberg spelled it all out saying,

If then your Synod maintains its protest against the Union (which is called "wrong & sinful"), what *must* and *will* be the outcome, dear brother? Surely, simply *this* that *our* Society *can not and dare not* send its missionaries any longer. At least, that is my stand in the matter, and I think I may say: *ours*.³³

The threat of losing support from Germany did not sway Wisconsin in its confessionalism. At the 1868 convention the Synod resolved:

That the *praeses* [president], because of various points in the Parting Letter, should address a detailed answer to the Societies. Furthermore, that in recognition of the fact that the break of the unionistic Societies with the Synod of Wisconsin was quite justified in view of their own stand, Synod should once more extend its hearty thanks for all the help rendered it up to the severing of their relations with it."³⁴

So Wisconsin cut its last ties with its unionistic parents. It had learned to walk without the support of the mission societies. It had been walking toward the Confessions for many years, but now it was clear to all where Wisconsin stood.

As we look at Wisconsin's walk toward confessionalism in view of its relationship with the mission societies, one point shines out. Despite old sentimental ties and current needs, an individual or a synod needs to stand on the convictions to which God's Word lead them. From a human point of view the break with the mission societies was bad. Wisconsin had a very young and shaky worker training program. Finances were also a difficulty. Would the Missouri Synod, which had been so hostile toward Wisconsin in recent years, help out in any way? Yet the Wisconsin Synod stood on the conviction that the confessions clearly expounded the truth of Scripture. Only God's Word can lead people to stand up for their faith in this way despite the problems that it might bring. Thanks be to God that his Word lived in the hearts of the pastors and people in the Wisconsin Synod.

³¹ Koehler, p. 106.

³² Koehler, p. 111, quoting the synod proceedings from 1867, p. 25.

³³ Koehler, p. 113, quoting letter from Schuermann to Bading, dated Dec. 21, 1867.

³⁴ Koehler, p. 118, quoting from 1868 synodical proceedings.

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH AMERICAN LUTHERAN CHURCH BODIES OTHER THAN THE MISSOURI SYNOD

Before we move on to Wisconsin's relationship with the Missouri Synod, which was the other major evidence of Wisconsin's move toward confessionalism, we want to quickly note Wisconsin's relationship with some of the other synods in America which were not as strongly confessional as Missouri.

As noted above, after Muehlhaeuser came to America, he entered the Pennsylvania Ministerium. This opened the door for ties between Wisconsin and the Pennsylvania Synod. Yet these ties never grew too strong. Pennsylvania often would send mission money to Wisconsin, along the lines of \$300, and Wisconsin thankfully acknowledged this.³⁵ Wisconsin also made limited use of the Gettysburg Seminary, under Prof. Schaeffer, D.D., for the training of a couple of students throughout the years.³⁶ But Wisconsin never grew as closely attached to the Pennsylvania Synod as it was to the German mission societies. Most of Wisconsin's pastors were trained in Germany, not in the Pennsylvania Synod. In addition, the German language was used much more in the Wisconsin Synod than in the Pennsylvania Synod.

Wisconsin, though, was concerned about the training of future pastors. Was there a possibility of training them closer to home than Gettysburg? A possibility of this arose in 1859, when "Prof. Reynolds of Springfield, member of the Northern Illinois Synod, asked the Wisconsin Synod whether it wouldn't like to join hands with him and his synod in founding a German professorship at the State University in Springfield."³⁷ This all fell through. The Germans and Norwegians in the Northern Illinois Synod were at odds with the Americans in that synod, who raged against the Lutheran confessions. Finally to keep peace within the Northern Illinois Synod, they all agreed to allow freedom of doctrine.³⁸ This led the Wisconsin Synod to say in the 1860 convention,

After a discussion took place about the possibility and necessity of establishing our synod's tie with the university in Springfield, it was resolved: Because of the prevailing confessional movement in both synods and the named university, that further negotiations be broken off and the university committee be released.³⁹

No close ties developed here either.

Looking back, we may be able to see God's gracious hand in preventing these ties from developing too strongly. It was one thing to break with mission societies across the ocean. If the Wisconsin Synod had learned to depend on Pennsylvania as it did on the mission societies or if the University of Springfield had supplied the synod with a number of pastors, wouldn't it have been all the harder to break with former friends who were so close, who would still be seen occasionally? In addition, I believe that the synods difficulty in finding a seminary to train its pastors led the convention in 1863 to considered it "absolutely imperative that the seminary be started."⁴⁰ Even though this was only getting off the ground at the time of the break with the mission societies, the synod could hope that in the near future it would be producing a steady stream of its own pastors.

³⁵ "Synodical Proceedings of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin in St. John Church, Milwaukee, May 30 to June 3, 1858 A.D.: Arnold O. Lehmann, trans. *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. vol. 12, no. 1 April 1994, p.10. and "1861 Synodical Proceedings," p. 16.

³⁶ "Proceedings of the Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin Held in the Church of the First Evangelical Lutheran Congregation in Racine, Wisconsin, June 18 to 24, 1859 A.D." Arnold O. Lehmann, trans. *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. vol. 12, no. 2. Oct. 1994, pp. 12-13, and "1861 Synodical Proceedings," p. 16,18

³⁷ Koehler, p. 97, quoting Bading, "Eine Stimme aus der Wiskonsin-Synode." *Neues Zeitblatt fuer die Angelegenheiten der Lutherischen Kirche*. June 3, 1864.

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ "Proceedings of the Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin held in the church of the First Evangelical Lutheran Congregation in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin from May 31 to June 7, 1860 A.D. Arnold

⁴⁰ Koehler, p. 90, quoting 1863 synodical proceedings.

Although the seminary was not around long enough by 1868 to substantially influence the move towards confessionalism, its establishment certainly had helped the Wisconsin Synod maintain its confessionalism. So we see that even in what might have seemed like set backs at the time, the Lord turned it all for the greater good of the synod and his kingdom.

One final note before we leave Wisconsin's relationship with other Lutheran church bodies in America is that the synod soundly rejected the Definite Platform in 1856.⁴¹ This document, as proposed by some within the eastern Lutheran synods, was Lutheran in name only. It even rescinded parts of the Augsburg Confession. Wisconsin's rejection of it is really no surprise. Even "mild" Lutheranism couldn't subscribe to it. Yet this does indicate that Wisconsin even at this date had its concerns about doctrinal matters.

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MISSOURI SYNOD

Wisconsin's relationship with the Missouri Synod went through quite a drastic change during this time. Hostility turned to friendship as they each realized that they agreed with each other in doctrine. Let's see how this came about.

The hostility between the two synods surfaced in local congregations and in the printed media. On the local level, there was a high potential for strife whenever a Wisconsin Synod congregation and Missouri Synod congregation were close to each other. Usually disgruntled members who left one synod's congregation and appealed to the other for help would be the catalyst for conflict. The Lebanon-Watertown situation is a case in point.

Conflict arose at the Missouri Synod congregation in Lebanon in 1859. Apparently Pastor Geyer had tried to impose private confession. A group of about 100 communicants under the leadership of the teacher, Mr. Wetzel, left because they preferred general confession. They eventually appealed to the Wisconsin Synod's pastor in Watertown, John Bading, to supply them with the Word and Sacrament. Bading agreed. This led to a series of accusations between Wisconsin and Missouri. Missouri accused Wisconsin of interfering in another man's ministry and not allowing the synod to handle its own problems. Wisconsin retaliated by accusing Pastor Geyer of legalistically imposing private confession, by saying that Missouri was lax in investigating the matter, and by pointing out that the people sought Bading out since they were not being spiritually fed.⁴² Eventually the fiery animosity died down. But this illustrates the tension on the local level between the two synods, tension that continued in places even after doctrinal unity was declared in 1868.

The tension on the local level gave each synod the occasion to lambast the other one in print. Missouri's accusations revolved around calling Wisconsin unionistic and pointing to its association with the mission societies and loose fellowship principles on the local level. Wisconsin would counter that Missouri practiced exclusive Lutheranism. In other words, Wisconsin said that Missouri lacked love for souls and legalistically hammered the letter of the confessions so that the smoldering wick of faith was extinguished in the hearts of the weak. This paper war was waged for over a decade and didn't end until 1868.

Here are a few excerpts to give a flavor of the battle. The Missouri used its publications the *Lutheraner* and *Lehre und Wehre* to print statements like the following:

It is terrible, for a fact, to have this synod [Wisconsin] pretend indignation and resent as an insult whenever testimony is offered to the effect that it isn't Lutheran but unionistic. Evidently it does so only to entrap ignorant and unsuspecting Lutherans and make of them well-paying members of its congregations, just as it, on the other hand, to obtain German money, drops its Lutheran mask in Germany. The worst of this, however, is that it does not only seek to attract those, say, who still go on without the Word of God, but with great relish pursues the capture of just those

⁴¹ "Synodical Convention in the First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Manitowac on Trinity Sunday 1856." Arnold O. Lehmann, trans. *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Vol. 11, no. 1. April 1993, p.6.

⁴² Koehler, pp. 56-60, he explains the whole case in detail.

souls and whole congregations which already have been ministered to by other servants of Christ, such as that who preach the Word of God in its purity and truth, and which have evaded discipline of doctrine and life.⁴³

Or at times they put it very concisely: “The ‘Lutheran’ Wisconsin Synod is a unionistic communion.”⁴⁴

Wisconsin at first had a more difficult time retaliating since they did not have a synod paper until the *Gemeinde-Blatt* was set up in 1865. But they get their shots as best they could. For instance, the 1857 convention “resolved that we as a synod do not send a delegate to the Missouri Synod as long as they do not discontinue their ‘Anathemas’ about us and do not retract the earlier ones.”⁴⁵ In 1862 when the convention was discussing sending men to study at either the Missouri Synod’s or Iowa Synod’s seminaries, the statement was made “that our Synod not at all approves of the exclusive trend of those two synods.”⁴⁶ Here we see that charge of “exclusive” Lutheranism. When the *Gemeinde-Blatt* was finally established, it, too, joined in the controversy. Hoenecke responded in it to Missouri by writing,

The Missouri Synod seems to delight in gathering and publishing as many facts as possible that actually or apparently are not to our, the Wisconsin Synod’s credit, so the “brethren here and over there” may find out what an ogre, what a body-and-soul devouring monster the Wisconsin Synod is. Well, facts can of course, be found; and we will tell the Missouri Synod for its consolation and peace of mind that we would not have to scratch our head to publish a passel too; but in view of the Eighth Commandment we don’t consider it Christian to sling every bit of mud around, so “the brethren here and over there” can stare at it and perchance also be dirtied thereby.”⁴⁷

In this way the war of words went on.

Everything changed in 1868. Because of Wisconsin’s breaking with the German mission societies, *Lehre und Wehre* reported,

We have just now read ... how violently the Neue Ev. Kirchenzeitung in Berlin is assailing the Wisconsin Synod, because it is most earnestly trying to extricate itself from the embrace of the Prussian state church and live up to the name of a Lutheran synod, which it bears. We feel it incumbent on us to publish this information here, inasmuch as we previously have often voiced our misgivings regarding the stand of this synod to the confession.... We can’t but pray God for His rich grace upon its further fight and faithfulness in the confession.⁴⁸

Wisconsin echoed this brotherly tone in its 1868 convention. The synod made a firm statement on fellowship saying “that it condemns, together with the whole orthodox Lutheran church, every form of altar and pulpit fellowship with unorthodox and heterodox believers as contrary to the doctrine and practice of the Lutheran church.”⁴⁹ Specifically in regard to Missouri the convention resolved that

to Synod’s knowledge there are no ‘church divisive differences’ between the two synods; the controverted matters rather are practical questions, aggression on the part of individual members

⁴³ Koehler, p. 107, quoting *Lutheraner* Jan. 21, 1863, p.87

⁴⁴ Koehler, p. 108, quoting *Lehre und Wehre*, Oct. 1864, p. 312.

⁴⁵ “Synodical Convention, Kilbourn Road, Town of Oak Creek, Milwaukee Co. on Trinity Sunday 1857 Until Wednesday after Trinity Sunday.” Arnold O. Lehmann, trans. *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Vol. 11, no 2. Oct. 1993, p.5

⁴⁶ Koehler, p. 84, quoting from the 1862 convention.

⁴⁷ Koehler, p. 116, quoting Hoenecke, Adolf, *Gemeinde-Blatt*. May 1, 1868.

⁴⁸ Koehler, p. 117, quoting *Lehre und Wehre*, June 1868.

⁴⁹ Koehler, p. 117, quoting from the 1868 convention.

of both synods and articles in the public prints, the tenor of which often is more that of malice and scorn than that of heartfelt sorrow over the evil conditions and of loving rebuke.⁵⁰

And it adopted the committee report that

synod instruct its *praeses* [president] to take the necessary steps to bring about peace, so mutual recognition of both synods as Lutheran and brotherly relations between the member of the two synods in the spirit of truth on the basis of pure doctrine may be achieved.⁵¹

It was already recounted at the beginning of this paper how the authorized meeting between the synods resulted in the discovery of fellowship between the two which was reported to the 1869 synod convention.

Such a remarkable change in relations could only be brought about by the Lord working in the hearts of his people to overlook past animosity and personal feelings in order to further the work of Christ's kingdom on earth. As we look at this change, I believe we can learn some things. The Missouri Synod rebuked what it saw as false doctrine and bad practice in the Wisconsin Synod. Rebuking can be God pleasing when it seeks to lead the erring back. I think that God worked through the words of rebuke from Missouri to prick the conscience of men in Wisconsin and to keep them reexamining exactly where they stood on Scripture and the Confessions and how this worked itself out in practice. God worked through Missouri's rebukes despite the bad spirit in which they often wrote. The fact that Lord turned it for good did not excuse Missouri's animosity.

One needs to be careful of stirring up animosity by simply labeling people or groups and calling them names, such as "unionistic" or "exclusively Lutheran." Rather deal with the issues at hand. At times, it is necessary to rebuke error sternly and in public, but at all times it needs to be done with heartfelt sorrow over the evil and in love for the erring.

Secondly, we can praise God that some men at that time recognized the difference between doctrine and practice. When the doctrine or principles are agreed on, church fellowship ought to be established. Practices will vary. Some practices may even appear to violate the doctrine agreed on, since pastors and congregations are still sinners. Yet such differences in practice need to be worked through in Christian love. One ought not to hastily judge his brother in the faith for what he sees as a faulty practice. Through humble, loving discussion one can discover whether the practice is beneficial or not or whether it is done out of ignorance or weakness. Public rebuke and warning others of the error should take place, only if an actual difference in doctrine is discovered. Much of what kept Missouri from constructively instructing Wisconsin until 1868 was that Missouri saw poor and wrong practices in Wisconsin and assumed the synod was not really Lutheran. In fact, it is reported that Walther said at the conclusion of the colloquy, "Brethren, if we had known all this before we might have been united ten years ago already."⁵² Christian love needs to humbly rebuke and instruct. A hateful rebuke only keeps Christians apart.

Thirdly, we give thanks to God that he led the men at that time to see past personal feelings and pride. Considering the war of words going on, it would be understandable from a human point of view if men like Bading and Walther would not even have thought about sitting down together. Yet trusting in the Lord and his Word to work in the heart, they went past any personal dislikes and worked together for the Lord's glory and the spreading of his kingdom. One ought not to let his personal feelings cloud the way he sees the issues or prevent him from working with others in Christian love.

INTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE WISCONSIN SYNOD

⁵⁰ Koehler, p. 118, quoting from the 1868 convention.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Koehler, p. 130, quoting what Bading, Hoenecke, and Koehler told him separately concerning what Walther said.

So far we have been focusing on the outward relationships of the Wisconsin Synod. In particular we watched Wisconsin step away from the German mission societies toward the Missouri Synod and confessionalism. Now it's time to look at some internal relationships. We will focus first of all on the relationship between the synod as a whole and the individual member congregations. Then we want to view the relationship between three pairs of individuals: John Bading and John Muehlhaeuser, Christian Philipp Koehler and Gottlieb Reim, Adolf Hoenecke and Edward Moldehnke. From these relationships I think that we will not only see evidence of steps towards confessionalism, but also gain some insight into the human factors God used to bring about that move.

As we look at the relationship between the synod as a whole and its individual member congregations and their pastors, there appears to be a growing concern for doctrinal unity in confession and practice. For instance, at the 1854 synod convention, Bading raises the question whether a preacher could perform official duties in a Methodist congregation. The question was deferred until later.⁵³ This was the same convention that Pastor Weitbrecht accepted back. He was the pastor mentioned above who had left for the Methodists and came back to Muehlhaeuser looking for mercy. I think Bading raised that question because of his concern over the leniency with which pastors were allowed into the synod. What kind of doctrinal unity could they have if pastors were allowed to be both Methodist and Lutheran?

Likewise, the synod at first was quite lenient toward doctrine within member congregations. That same convention in 1854 discussed the situation in the Schlesingerville [Slinger] congregation. Apparently there were a Lutheran faction and a Reformed faction which argued over how the Lord Supper ought to be distributed (wafers or bread). The synod advised that the Lutheran way should be followed, but, if it were absolutely necessary for peace, both ways should be done.⁵⁴ Although the method of distribution is an adiaphora, it would appear that there was a fundamental difference in doctrine between the two opposing sides. In time of controversy like that, one ought not to give in for the sake of outward peace, even in matters of adiaphora.

However, the synod was taking steps to ensure more doctrinal unity among its congregations and pastors. In the 1856 convention, synod appointed a committee "to draw up a congregation constitution which should be used by newly founded congregations whenever possible."⁵⁵ Pastor Reim, Koehler, Sauer, and Bading made up the committee. They were all fairly sound, confessional men. That same convention authorized C. P. Koehler to investigate whether the majority of people living in West Bend and the surrounding area are adherents to the Lutheran faith or the Reformed.⁵⁶ Koehler was to take it over only if he found a majority of Lutherans. In the following year, the synod added to its constitution that

each congregation which desires to join our synod must accept the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church, especially the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession* and Luther's *Small Catechism*, pledging to use the *Small Catechism* as the book for the religious instruction of its youth.⁵⁷

We see a trend toward ensuring that the synod's member congregations are united with it in confessing the true faith as expressed in the Lutheran Confessions.

The Synod also took steps to help ensure that the pastors it received into fellowship were doctrinally sound. In 1857 it abolished the licensing method in which a pastoral candidate had trial basis for a year under the supervision of a neighboring pastor. In its place they established an examination committee to discover whether the candidate was qualified to be ordained or not.⁵⁸ Pastors Reim, Koehler, and Bading made up the committee that year. The next year the examination of candidates was entrusted to the pastors in the

⁵³ Synodical Proceedings 1854, p.30

⁵⁴ Koehler, p. 47. Synodical Proceedings 1854, p. 31.

⁵⁵ Synodical Proceedings 1856, p.5

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ "Synodical Convention, Kilbourn Road, Town of Oak Creek, Milwaukee Co. on Trinity Sunday 1857 Until Wednesday After Trinity Sunday." Arnold O. Lehmann, trans. *WELS Historical Institute Journal*. Vol. 11, no. 2. Oct. 1993, p.4

⁵⁸ Synodical Proceedings, 1857, p. 6

Northwestern Conference of the Synod, located around Watertown.⁵⁹ This method allowed for closer examination of the doctrine of the candidates, and the committee at times would not pass a candidate.

We see the evidence of the growing commitment to the confessions when President Bading's report to the 1861 convention specially says that the two candidates "pledged their allegiance to the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church."⁶⁰ In the 1865 convention Prof. Moldehnke defended this examination procedure and in a paper stated that "it [Wisconsin Synod] adheres to the symbolic books of our Lutheran church, because they are in agreement with the Word of God."⁶¹ After that sentence the synodical proceedings say:

Therewith the previously continued discussion of the 'because' in the pledge to the Symbols, 'because they are the right interpretation of Holy Scripture', is resumed. This discussion yields the resolution: 1. that the Because in the final sentence refers to the whole doctrinal content, 2. that in this sense the final sentence is adopted."⁶²

This shows that the pledge of new pastors to the Confessions was without qualifiers.

As the synod strengthened its confessional relationship with its member congregations and pastors, it continued to grow more faithful to the Confessions and Scripture. It took time for the synod to realize that peace at any cost is not really peace. When it comes to a matter of doctrine, love cannot compromise. The synod learned it had to say no to certain men who were not qualified for the ministry and to certain congregations who tried to allow a plurality of doctrines. Yet through this all the Synod came closer to confessionalism because they were standing on Scripture and practicing love for its doctrines.

BADING AND MUEHLHAEUSER

As we look at the following personal relationships within the synod, we want to see how the inter-play between the two members of the pairs indicated the synod's move toward confessionalism. The pairing is not meant to indicate a hostile conflict between the two, nor necessarily a close partnership either. Each of the three pairs though helps us see how the Lord used the right man with his special God-given abilities to further his kingdom's work.

We already discussed Muehlhaeuser in the section "Starting Point." In the early 1850's he had a weak understanding of the Confessions and often his heart would lead him to act contrary to the Confessions. Yet over that decade, he appears to grow in appreciation of the Lutheran Confessions. He may have called them "paper fences" at Bading's ordination in 1854,⁶³ but in the president's report of 1858 "he specifically referred to the confessional stand of the synod within the Lutheran Church, countering the charges being circulated against the synod."⁶⁴ In 1860, he again sounded the conviction that true doctrine must be upheld. "We must preach the word of God at the proper time, and at other times we should punish, threaten and admonish with all patience, and with doctrine."⁶⁵

But it was not for Muehlhaeuser to lead the synod to the completion of the journey toward confessionalism. Although he seems to have had a growing appreciation for the Confessions, his knowledge of them probably remained shallow. Also, he may have retained a reputation of being unionistic, especially in the minds of members of the Missouri Synod.

⁵⁹ Synodical Proceedings, 1858, p. 9

⁶⁰ Synodical Proceedings 1861, p. 8

⁶¹ Koehler, p. 109, quoting from the Synodical Proceedings, 1865, p. 20.

⁶² *ibid*

⁶³ see footnote 16.

⁶⁴ Synodical Proceedings, 1858, p.4.

⁶⁵ Synodical Proceedings 1960, p.6.

Apart from all this, Muehlhaeuser was feeling his age. He was nearly sixty. The fight towards confessionalism would be for the next generation. And the Lord had the man in mind to lead the Wisconsin Synod there, John Bading.

From early on Bading was concerned about the lack of a strong confessional stand in the synod. After the disagreement with Muehlhaeuser over the Confessions at his ordination, Bading talked with the president of the Northern District of the Missouri Synod (Fuerbringer) about joining Missouri. The president advised him to stay in Wisconsin and lend his influence, which he did.⁶⁶

Now came the time for the transfer of power. But we should not view this as a power struggle, as if the unionistic faction led by Muehlhaeuser was defeated by the confessional faction led by Bading. There is no hint of that in the synodical proceedings. Rather I view the situation as a natural development considering the synod's progress towards confessionalism. The brotherly transfer of the presidency is shown by the creation of the office of Senior to honor Muehlhaeuser⁶⁷ and by the following resolution:

On June 4 of this year our former president, Pastor Muehlhaeuser, declared that he, because of the annual increasing pressure on him in the administration of the synod's business, could no longer carry out the duties of the office of the president of our Ev. Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin—an office which had received God's blessings up to the present time. With deep regret all members of our synod heard and accepted his statement which he remained firm in spite of all pleas. It is with deeply felt sorrow that we must yield to the wish of our president.⁶⁸

Bading showed himself to be faithful to the Scriptures and the confessions. In his first President's Report to the synod he says, "We have in our Evangelical Lutheran Church his pure and unadulterated word. Therefore let us hold fast to it in life and death as did our fathers."⁶⁹ In the President's Report the following year "he pointed out that the confessions of the church must be considered binding not to *the extent that they agree with the Word of God but because they so agree.*"⁷⁰

The Lord blessed the synod with appropriate leaders at the appropriate times.

KOEHLER AND REIM

Christian Philipp Koehler served as a faithful pastor in the synod beginning in 1855.⁷¹ Gottlieb Reim briefly served as president during Bading's fund raising trip to Germany. Both of these men were fairly confessional. Yet a tension developed while Reim was acting president and Koehler was secretary. This tension involved the relationship with the German mission societies. This was hinted at during our discussion of the synod's relationship with these societies.

Earlier we saw how Koehler questioned Wisconsin's involvement with the mission societies in the late 1850's and early 1860's. But push came to shove in 1863.

Reim was acting president because of Bading's absence. He had Prof. Moldehnke write a letter to the Prussian Supreme Church Council in an attempt to appease the worries of the mission societies that Wisconsin was becoming too confessional. Among other things the letter said,

⁶⁶ Koehler, p. 45.

⁶⁷ Synodical Proceedings 1860, p. 11.

⁶⁸ *ibid.* p. 12.

⁶⁹ Synodical Proceedings 1961, p. 5.

⁷⁰ Koehler, p.84

⁷¹ Koehler, p. 48.

we have continually supplied union congregations with the Word and Sacrament, as soon as they signified their willingness to suffer Lutheran doctrine and practice, and we shall in the future, for Christ's sake and the sake of the brethren's need observe this policy.⁷²

Koehler, as secretary, needed to sign and seal the letter, but he refused. In a letter of explanation to Reim he says,

For conscience' [*sic*] sake I can't sign my name to it. In this petition it is stated clearly several times that we are ready to serve United and Reformed congregations *as such*, whereas our constitution and the congregational code likewise require that the congregations belonging to us be of the true Lutheran confession, hence no longer United or Reformed, but Lutheran. We did, indeed, do that formerly, but that we are going to keep it up, that's more than I know, it certainly isn't the will and wish of Synod.⁷³

Koehler again declined to sign it the following month, and in another letter to Reim he offers to resign saying, "If you want to relieve me of the secretary's office and appoint some one else in my place, I am ready to turn over everything that belongs to Synod."⁷⁴ After Reim apparently asked Koehler again to sign, Koehler again refused.⁷⁵

The waters appear to be quieted in the 1864 convention. Hoenecke was elected secretary, and he wrote in the introduction to the synodical proceedings

What the opening prayer of every session asked for in faith, the God of peace granted in rich measure: brotherly accord in all deliberations remained undisturbed and made the days of meeting a lasting source of quickening for all the members. As much as substantial differences had been anticipated here and there, one thing that this meeting gave witness of, to the confirming and strengthening of all, is that the whole Synod is conspicuously on the way to firm coherence, such as is rooted in and guaranteed not by shrewd church management but by the unanimous stand for our Lutheran confessions.⁷⁶

As we noted above, this all led to the eventual break with the unionistic mission societies.

An interesting point as we look at the relationship between Koehler and Reim is to note how two men who basically agreed in doctrine and were working toward the same goal of confessionalism could still come to sharp differences in opinion. The Lord entrusts his people to use their Christian conscience, guided by his Word, to make decisions in life. Sometimes brothers (and sisters) in the faith can come to different conclusions on how to achieve the goals. I'm sure Reim thought it best to preserve the relationship with the mission societies, at least for the time being. Koehler thought it was about time to break. By God's grace they managed to work together as brothers in Christ, each contributing what his ability and what his conscience would allow. In it all the Lord preserved the synod using the steady hand of Reim and the confessional zeal of Koehler.

HOENECKE AND MOLDEHNKE

⁷² Koehler, p. 95, quoting a draft of a copy of a letter to Prussian Supreme Church Council, dated Dec. 15, 1863.

⁷³ Koehler, p. 95, quoting a letter from Koehler to Reim, dated Dec. 30, 1863.

⁷⁴ Koehler, p. 96, quoting a letter from Koehler to Reim, dated Jan. 21, 1864.

⁷⁵ Koehler, p. 96.

⁷⁶ Koehler, p. 99, quoting Synodical Proceedings, 1864.

Both Adolf Hoenecke and Edward Moldehnke were trained at Halle.⁷⁷ Unlike the majority of pastors in the synod, who were trained at mission societies, these two had a university training. Moldehnke was sent over by the mission societies in 1861 as a traveling missionary.⁷⁸ The 1863 convention appointed him head of the seminary and allowed him still to devote three months a Year to traveling-missionary work.⁷⁹ In 1865 he became the first editor of the *Gemeinde-Blatt*.⁸⁰ In 1866, he resigned from the seminary and from being editor.⁸¹ He went to Minnesota and then soon returned to Germany.⁸²

It was mentioned above that in 1863 he wrote the letter to the Prussian Supreme Church Council which C. P. Koehler objected to because it indicated that the synod tended toward unionism. Yet Moldehnke appeared to be fairly confessional in 1865 when he gave a paper at the synod convention which concluded, “It [Wisconsin Synod] adheres to the symbolical books of our Lutheran church, because they are in agreement with the Word of God.”⁸³ He might have had the ability to be the theologian to guide the Wisconsin Synod on its way to confessionalism. Yet J. P. Koehler describes him as a man with a “volatile temperament.”⁸⁴ He also appears to have had a tendency to spread himself too thin. He was involved in the seminary, in mission work, and in the *Gemeinde-blatt*. During Bading’s absence in Europe he also served Bading’s congregation in Watertown.⁸⁵ The Lord had a different man in mind to be the confessional theologian for the Wisconsin Synod.

That man was Adolf Hoenecke, who in many ways served as Moldehnke’s successor. The mission societies sent Hoenecke over in 1862.⁸⁶ He was elected synod secretary in 1864.⁸⁷ As secretary he defended the synod’s confessional position in response to the charges of the mission societies, as we saw above (p.11). When Moldehnke left, Hoenecke stepped in as editor of the *Gemeinde-Blatt* and as president of the seminary.⁸⁸ As editor he held his own against the printed attacks the Missouri Synod aimed against Wisconsin (see page 19). Hoenecke was the well-trained, level-headed confessional theologian Wisconsin needed at this crucial time. It is reported that in 1867 Walther said of Hoenecke, “Yes, I have been taking note of him for some time. We may hope for much from him.”⁸⁹ Hoenecke lived up to these expectations.

As we leave the internal relationships in the Wisconsin Synod, it may be useful to point out that Bading, Koehler, and Hoenecke were three of the five Wisconsin Synod representatives in the 1868 colloquy with Missouri. Although it is dangerous to characterize people in only a couple of words, sometimes that helps us to see how the Lord uses diverse talents in his kingdom. Bading appears to me to be the one who recognized the practical implications of a situation. He stood on the confessions but also realized that the synod needed to make ends meet in a material world. He has a leveling influence to guide the synod through this difficult transition to confessionalism. Koehler seems to me to be much more reactionary. He saw that a confessional church should not fellowship with unionistic mission societies, and he wanted to cut off that relationship as soon as possible. Yet he also had a measure of patience to work it through with his brothers. He may have been the push to get things going when human nature wanted to settle in the rut of the status quo. Hoenecke, as well, brought his unique skills. He was the best educated of the three, and he used this to defend the Wisconsin synod and its stand on the confessions, while at the same time instructing the Wisconsin synod on what it means to be

⁷⁷ Koehler, pp. 77, 88.

⁷⁸ Koehler, p. 78.

⁷⁹ Koehler, p. 90, quoting from Synodical Proceedings, 1863.

⁸⁰ Koehler, p. 14.

⁸¹ Koehler, p. 112.

⁸² Koehler, p. 128.

⁸³ Koehler, p. 109, quoting from Synodical Proceedings, 1865. Cf. Footnote 62.

⁸⁴ Koehler, p. 119.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Koehler, p. 88.

⁸⁷ Koehler, p. 99.

⁸⁸ Koehler, p. 122.

⁸⁹ Koehler, p. 115, reporting what he had heard over 60 years later in the family circle of prominent members of Walther’s city-wide parish.

confessional. If Bading was a guiding hand in practical matters, Hoenecke was in intellectual, doctrinal matters. The Lord has given each of his people differing gifts. Yet they can all be used for his kingdom and glory.

CONCLUSION

So we have seen how step by step, with one foot in front of the other, the Wisconsin synod was brought toward confessionalism. It is easy to focus on the major relationships with the mission societies and the Missouri Synod, and to point out key men like Bading, Koehler, and Hoenecke. Yet we ought never to forget that it is the Holy Spirit working through the Word to prompt and empower these men to act. And it is not only these men, but the numerous pastors and people in the synod in whom the Holy Spirit also was at work. The move to confessionalism was not a tyrannical push by a few men. As the Spirit blessed his church with faithful teachers, he also worked through their teaching to lead the hearts of others to love his word and to be willing to stand on the Confessions, which clearly express that Word. All glory goes to God!

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