

Abel J. Brown:
Appalachian Lutheran

Pastor, Educator, and Scholar

An Introduction and Proposed Course of Further Study



Church History 3031

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Introduction: Why Brown?

If Charles Porterfield Krauth is to be believed, Abel J. Brown (1817-1894) was a Lutheran theologian and writer of the highest caliber:

We are always glad when our noble old standard bearer of the South comes to the front. His fight is always a good fight – a battle well-waged, for great principles, a battle under the cross. This sermon is on a theme well adapted to draw out his whole intellectual vigor and his affection; for Dr. Brown is a Lutheran in conviction and in love too. His head and his heart are not pulling against each other. With his compact, clear handling, he has done a great deal, even in the confined compass of a single sermon. I. He shows the origin of the Lutheran Church. II. Its grand fundamental principles. III. Some of its more prominent doctrinal features. It is a timely, sober, but impressive discourse, and cannot be too widely circulated. We hope Dr. Brown will not let his pen be idle – a pen which has already done such great and good service. We trust that some day, his works may be gathered into permanent shape – an honor which they well deserve.¹

This glowing endorsement of a sermon of Dr. Brown's is found in the April 9, 1880 issue of *Our Church Paper*, a newspaper affiliated with the Tennessee Synod. By 1880 Krauth and Brown had been affiliated with each other through the General Council for 6 years, and Krauth would have had numerous occasions to examine both the man and his writings. Unfortunately, Krauth's assumption about Brown's writings has yet to be realized. It is the intention of this paper to take the first steps in making Krauth's dream a reality.

Brown's writings have never been collected and edited, but can be found scattered throughout rare-book rooms across the Eastern United States. A complete study of his life and writings would require extensive travel and time spent in libraries, because so many of his writings are fragile pamphlets and not available for interlibrary loan, or are found in newspapers that currently only exist on microfilm.² This paper will hopefully provide a firm basis for a more thorough study, seeking to sketch a

¹ Dr C. P. Krauth, editorial note in *Our Church Paper*, April 8, 1880.

² This paper has consulted whatever sources have been attainable through the Internet, a roll of microfilm containing *Our Church Paper* from the 1870s-late 1880s, the East Tennessee State University rare book room, the the Lindberger Memorial Library at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, and the James R. Crumley, Jr. Archives in the basement of the same building. More time spent in the latter would certainly yield more results, but unfortunately those sources are expensive to copy. Travel would be required to consult a wider range of *Our Church Paper*, the *Lutheran and Missionary* in which Brown also published, and the local

brief outline of Brown's life, highlighting his activities as a pastor and leader in two Lutheran Synods.

One work will be examined in detail because of its importance in showing his development as a theologian, and the rest of his known works will be briefly listed and commented upon at the end.

Throughout, proposals for further research will be given in the footnotes.

An Old Lutheran Upbringing

Brown was born on March 27, 1817 to Absalom and Elizabeth (Killian) Brown, the second of ten children, from a family of German and English extraction.³ His parents were devout Lutherans who had him baptized in infancy at their local parish, St. John's near Lincolnton, North Carolina. Two years later, at a convention of the North Carolina Synod in Lincolnton in 1819, the Henkel family and a few of their associates reached an impasse with the North Carolina Synod and decided to form the new Evangelical Lutheran Tennessee Synod, of which St. John's became a member. The Brown home was known as "the preacher's home" – that is, the traveling Tennessee Synod preachers would often stay with his parents

newspapers and court records of Blountville, Tennessee. Several of Brown's sermons are only available in Philadelphia, but I have been unsuccessful in attaining copies. It would be wonderful to find a collection of his personal papers, but no record has been found of what happened to them when he died, if anything. They could have been donated to a wide variety of sources, including Jefferson Male Academy archives, the local library or courthouse, his family, or archives of his congregations or of the Holston Synod. Since his son was a well-known attorney and state representative, he could have had his father's papers put in an archive in Nashville. Wherever they are, if they exist, I have not been able to find them.

³ I have consulted five primary life sketches for this portion of the paper, supplemented by other sources. The primary five sources are: *Life Sketches of Lutheran Ministers: North Carolina and Tennessee Synods 1773-1965*, Committee on Historical Work, North Carolina Synod of the Lutheran Church in America (North Carolina Synod of the Lutheran Church in America, 1966), 30; *A History of Tennessee from the Earliest Times to the Present, together with an Historical and a Biographical Sketch of Sullivan County* (Nashville: Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1886), 1303-1304; J.H. Summit, "Obituary of Rev. Abel J. Brown," appended to the 1895 Minutes of the Evangelical Lutheran Holston Synod (Knoxville, TN: Beckett, Haws, & Co., 1895), no page numbers; J. C. Jensson, *American Lutheran Biographies* (Milwaukee, WI: Press of A. Houtkamp & Son, 1890), 114-115; and O. Taylor, *Historic Sullivan: A History of Sullivan County, Tennessee, with Brief Biographies of the Makers of History* (Bristol, TN: The King Printing Co., 1909), 252-257. If information is taken from these sources, the source will only be indicated when a bit of information is only given in one or two biographical sketches. Otherwise it can be assumed that the information is common to three or more sources. This is simply to avoid having footnotes for every sentence.

on their long journeys visiting their scattered flocks.⁴ So during his formative years, Abel Brown would have learned his theology from the staunchest Lutherans in the United States of America in a period of intense controversy. His parish was in the center of theological debate and discussion. No doubt Abel had met Pastor David Henkel, the leading theologian of the Tennessee Synod. Abel was at the impressionable age of fourteen in 1831 when Henkel was laid to rest in St. John's cemetery after his untimely death. Presumably, the funeral of this leading pastor and theologian made a lasting impression on young Abel.⁵ There is no question that David Henkel impacted his theology and view of Lutheranism, as evidenced by the fact that Henkel's story is told and his works are quoted in Brown's first publication six years after the funeral, in 1838 (see below).

A Budding Young Theologian

Interestingly, Abel was not confirmed until 1835 at the age of 18, but this must reflect a much different practice than we are accustomed to today, because he was made a deacon at St. John's the following year, preaching his first sermon on Romans 8:32.⁶ The Tennessee Synod had a system in which a candidate would first be licensed as a deacon, enabling him to catechize, read sermons, conduct funerals, admonish, and baptize in the absence of a pastor. This was not a full-time position, but often, neither was that of pastor.⁷ Brown made quick progress as a deacon, and was ordained as a pastor the next year in 1837.⁸ His abilities must have made an impression. In 1838, Brown was appointed secretary of the synod convention, was commissioned to write a response to accusations against the Tennessee

⁴ J.H. Summit, *Obituary*.

⁵ See David Henkel's obituary in S. Henkel, *The History of the Evangelical Lutheran Tennessee Synod* (New Market, VA: Henkel Press, 1890), 80-82.

⁶ J.H. Summit, *Obituary*.

⁷ S. Henkel, *History*, 26-27 and G. Cox, *Reminiscences of the Founders of the Evangelical Lutheran Holston Synod* (Spencer, NC: The Spencer Crescent Print, 1915), 5-6.

⁸ See the minutes of the synod as recorded in S. Henkel, *History*, 88-92.

Synod by both the South Carolina Synod and the Virginia Synod, and was appointed to travel to Missouri and help organize the Lutheran church per the request of some members of the Indiana Synod. It wasn't as though he was idle; by 1838 he was already busy preaching and organizing Morning Star congregation in Mecklenburg County from 1836-1839, and Lutheran Chapel in Gastonia beginning in 1838, among other various travels (see below).⁹

In 1838 (at the age of 21) he also co-authored his first surviving work, *A Vindication of the Evangelical Lutheran Tennessee Synod: A Reply to a Sermon Delivered by the Rev. John Bachman, D.D., on the Doctrine and Discipline of the Lutheran Church*. Brown had gone to South Carolina to minister to some re-located Tennessee Synod Lutherans, and while there had come in contact with laypeople and pastors of the South Carolina Synod. During his stay, an anonymous tract by a certain "Melancton" had surfaced, denouncing the "Henkelites" of the "Tennessee Conference" and giving a false representation of their founding and character. Brown thought that he had corrected misunderstandings, but then at the 1837 conference of the South Carolina Synod, Rev. Bachman preached a sermon accusing the Tennessee Synod of teaching: "1st, that Baptism is regeneration; 2nd, that in the Lord's Supper the bread and wine become the actual flesh and blood of Christ; and thirdly, that the participation in the sacraments entitles us to salvation."¹⁰

Brown's 46-page treatise gives the history of his trip to South Carolina, then goes on to give a detailed version of the founding of the Tennessee Synod, showing that the North Carolina Synod violated its own constitution and Lutheran doctrine in its treatment of David Henkel. He vindicated the character and intellect of David Henkel, pointing out his knowledge of the original languages of Scripture.¹¹ He argues that the Tennessee Synod, and not the North Carolina Synod, truly deserves the

⁹ *Life Sketches*, 30.

¹⁰ A.J. Brown, *A Vindication*, 6.

¹¹ A.J. Brown, *A Vindication*, 12.

name "Lutheran," reminding them that the Lutheran church is built upon the doctrines of the Augsburg Confession which the NC Synod abandoned, but the Tennessee Synod still upheld.¹²

Brown then explains the sacraments against Dr. Bachman's accusations. Quoting Luther's catechisms, selections from his sermons, and his Galatians commentary,¹³ as well as David Henkel's *Answer to Mr. Joseph Moore, the Methodist*,¹⁴ he shows that baptism efficaciously works regeneration, but is not equal to regeneration, and that this is the true Lutheran teaching.¹⁵ He concludes with a few desultory remarks on baptism with the Holy Spirit, circumcision, and the importance of using water in baptism.¹⁶

In treating the Lord's Supper, Brown immediately repudiates the charge of transubstantiation, and goes on to again quote extensively from Luther, the Augsburg Confession, and David Henkel, this time his *Carolinian Herald of Liberty*,¹⁷ to show that true Lutherans have always taught a real presence in the sacrament. He then gives a lengthy quote from the church historian Milner, followed by a quote from Luther's *Great Confession*, to further assure the readers that this is in fact the historical Lutheran position.¹⁸ He concedes that this doctrine is contrary to human reason, but asserts it is to be believed nonetheless because it is the clear teaching of the infallible Holy Scriptures. He then argues against a representationist interpretation of the words of institution based on the gender of the Greek pronoun used:

¹² A.J. Brown, *A Vindication*, 14-18.

¹³ He quotes a Jena edition of Luther's works.

¹⁴ D. Henkel, *Answer to Mr. Joseph Moore, the Methodist* (New Market, VA: S.G. Henkel, 1825).

¹⁵ A.J. Brown, *A Vindication*, 18-23.

¹⁶ A.J. Brown, *A Vindication*, 23-29.

¹⁷ D. Henkel, *Carolinian Herald of Liberty, Religious and Political* (Salisbury, NC: Krider & Bingham, 1821).

¹⁸ A.J. Brown, *A Vindication*, 29-37.

By what rules of language can it be made to appear, that a neuter relative pronoun can have a masculine antecedent? Since the idiom of the Greek text does not admit the bread, it being masculine, to be the antecedent of the pronoun *this*, it being neuter, it is evident that this tropical, and popular explanation: "this bread signifies my body," is a gross violation of the rules of grammar; hence vulgar, sophistical, and an imposition upon the understanding of the common English reader.¹⁹

Brown concludes his treatment of the Lord's Supper by again acknowledging that the real presence is beyond our comprehension, but that many doctrines of Christianity are equally absurd, but nevertheless to be believed. He then concludes his entire treatise by calling the South Carolina Synod to repentance for its misrepresentations and slander against the Tennessee Synod, and for departing from the Augsburg Confession while claiming the name Lutheran.

This work is worthy of special attention, because it was written when Brown was twenty-one years old. Though he had already been engaged in the ministry for several years and preached at several different churches, he had not yet gone to college. His education to this point had been at the local boys' academy and on the road, studying with other pastors in the Tennessee Synod. But at this early age he is confident and bold enough to challenge a senior clergyman and doctor of divinity; in fact he ends the treatise by calling an entire synod to repent! His arguments show that he is well acquainted with Luther, the Lutheran Confessions, and of the writings of David Henkel, and has at least some knowledge of the subtleties of the Greek language. This not only speaks to Brown's native abilities, it keeps us from too easily dismissing the apprenticeship based training of pastors in the Tennessee Synod. Though spread out across rural parishes in the Appalachian mountains in the early nineteenth century, the Tennessee Synod, at least in the early decades, was producing well-educated young ministers.

¹⁹ A.J. Brown, *A Vindication*, 41.

Off to School

The details of Brown's life for the next few years are not extensive. He continued to preach in North and South Carolina. He was appointed secretary of the synod at the 1839 convention, then in 1840 was appointed to visit congregations in South Carolina petitioning to join the Tennessee Synod. He was elected secretary again in 1841, and appointed to draw up the Tennessee Synod's objections to the General Synod, demonstrating how that body had departed from the doctrines of the Lutheran Church. In 1842, he was again appointed secretary and his drafted letter to the General Synod was received very favorably. But he is noticeably absent from the 1843 convention – and these minutes are noticeably shorter than the proceeding conventions in which he took the notes! Brown does not appear again in the minutes until 1847.

There is a good reason for his absence in the minutes of 1843-1846. At some point in his travels, he had met a girl from Washington County, Virginia, named Julia Teeter.²⁰ They were married in 1842 (he was now twenty-five years old), but unfortunately she died about a year after their marriage, at which point Brown decided to change directions and enroll in Emory and Henry College, completing his education. He earned a Bachelor's graduating in 1847, now thirty years old. He then moved to Blountville, Tennessee, where he would spend the rest of his life (with the exception of two years spent in nearby Greenville). Thus he was again free in 1847 and able to attend the Tennessee synod convention, which happened to be held in Blountville.

²⁰ Washington County is in southwest Virginia, and Brown would likely have traveled through East Tennessee to get there. Only a few miles across the border lies Blountville, Tennessee, where Brown ended up settling down. It is a reasonable conjecture that he and his wife (the second Teeter sister) chose to live near his in-laws.

Professor Brown Settles Down

Upon moving to Blountville, he took charge of Jefferson Male Academy, the first higher educational institute in the Blountville area. In the next year, 1848, he married Emily Teeter, the sister of his late wife Julia.²¹ Emily would survive Abel by several years. After a few years at Jefferson Male Academy he accepted a professorship at Greenville College, about 50 miles southwest. It is not clear why, but after two years there, he decided to return to Blountville and took charge of the academic department of the enlarged and rebuilt Jefferson Male Academy. This must have been by 1856, when his son Charles Augustus was born in Bluff City, which is next to Blountville.²² A few years later in 1858, he took on the additional responsibilities of being the primary pastor of Immanuel's and Beuhler's congregations, on opposite sides of Blountville.

So from 1847-1858, or essentially his entire thirties, Brown was busy with his teaching career and starting his family, and therefore not able to be engaged in full-time work for the church as he was in his late teens and early twenties.²³ This does not mean his church work was on hold. He preached, often gratuitously, in the congregations of Sullivan County and the surrounding area. He attended conferences and was given important tasks. In 1847 Brown was again elected secretary, and the minutes of the synod resumed their previous length. That same year he was elected to a committee to deal with a dispute regarding Adam Miller, a pastor who was removed for cause, and had gone on to found the

²¹ It is not clear if they married before or after he moved to Blountville. O. Taylor, *Historic Sullivan*, asserts that he was married a year after arriving in Blountville (252). But the Sullivan County Historical Commission's *Historic Sites of Sullivan County* (Kingsport, TN: The Kingsport Press, 1976) asserts the he married in 1847 before moving to Blountville. This could hopefully be clarified by visiting the Sullivan County, Tennessee, and Washington County, Virginia courthouses, as could more details about the homes in which he lived and when he bought his large plantation.

²² Charles would grow up to be a successful lawyer and Democratic state representative from 1890-1892. Charles is listed as one of a family of eight children, four of whom survived to adulthood in W.T. Hale and D.L. Merritt, *A History of Tennessee and Tennesseans*, volume 8 (Chicago and New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1913), 2353.

²³ A more detailed chronology of his employment, homes, and the birth of his children could hopefully be obtained from a trip to Blountville to consult the county records, the historical society, and the genealogical society.

Evangelical Lutheran Tennessee Synod Re-Organized, taking a handful of congregations with him. In 1848 Brown was not present at the synod convention, but sent a letter recommending the synod consider closer ties with the West Virginia Synod.

In 1852 he was again elected secretary, and gave notice of his intention to introduce a resolution to establish a literary institution, to which the synod agreed.²⁴ In 1853, Brown added an interesting appendix to the minutes, detailing the correspondence he received during the previous year as secretary of the synod. First he related a letter from the Virginia Synod, informing the Tennessee Synod that the resolutions passed in 1838 and 1839 against her had been rescinded. Second, he gives a full copy of a letter sent from T. Brohm and A. Hoyer on behalf of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and other States, which he calls "interesting and encouraging." They explain how they were appointed as delegates to deliver fraternal greetings to the Tennessee Synod, but when they discovered how far away Tennessee was, they changed their minds. The Missouri Synod was very encouraged by the publication of the Henkel Book of Concord:

In order to compensate this want of personal attendance, we take the liberty, with consent of our president, to address your reverend body by these few lines, assuring you of our fraternal love and sympathy, founded upon the conviction, that it is one and the same faith which dwells in you and in us. We are highly rejoiced in this vast desert and wilderness, to meet a whole Lutheran Synod steadfastly holding to the precious Confessions of our beloved church, and zealously engaged in divulging the unaltered doctrines and principles of the Reformation among the English portion of Lutherans, by translating the standard writings of our Fathers, at the same time firmly resisting the allurements of those who say they are Lutherans, and are not.²⁵

Their intention to visit was fulfilled at the 1854 convention of the Tennessee Synod near Lexington, South Carolina, over which Abel Brown was president for the first time. Theodore Brohm from the Missouri Synod was present, and the Tennessee Synod passed a resolution to reciprocate the kind feelings towards Missouri, to "endeavor to cultivate a more intimate acquaintance and a closer

²⁴ The Henkel *Book of Concord* had been published only the year before, and it is not clear what relationship if any this resolution had to that endeavor.

²⁵ S. Henkel, *History*, 139-140

union with the Missouri Synod," and to send Socrates Henkel to their next convention for that purpose.²⁶ Brown was again elected president in 1855 at the convention in New Market, Virginia. He then appears on committees drawing up rules of order and a constitution in 1857 and 1859. So while Brown may not have been a full-time pastor from 1847-1858, he was involved in the life of the synod and presumably involved in preaching and other activities on a part-time basis.

At this point, we will digress to give a few general comments on Brown's personal life and his work as an educator in Blountville from 1847 until his death, after which we will resume a chronological approach to his work as a leader of the Holston Synod.

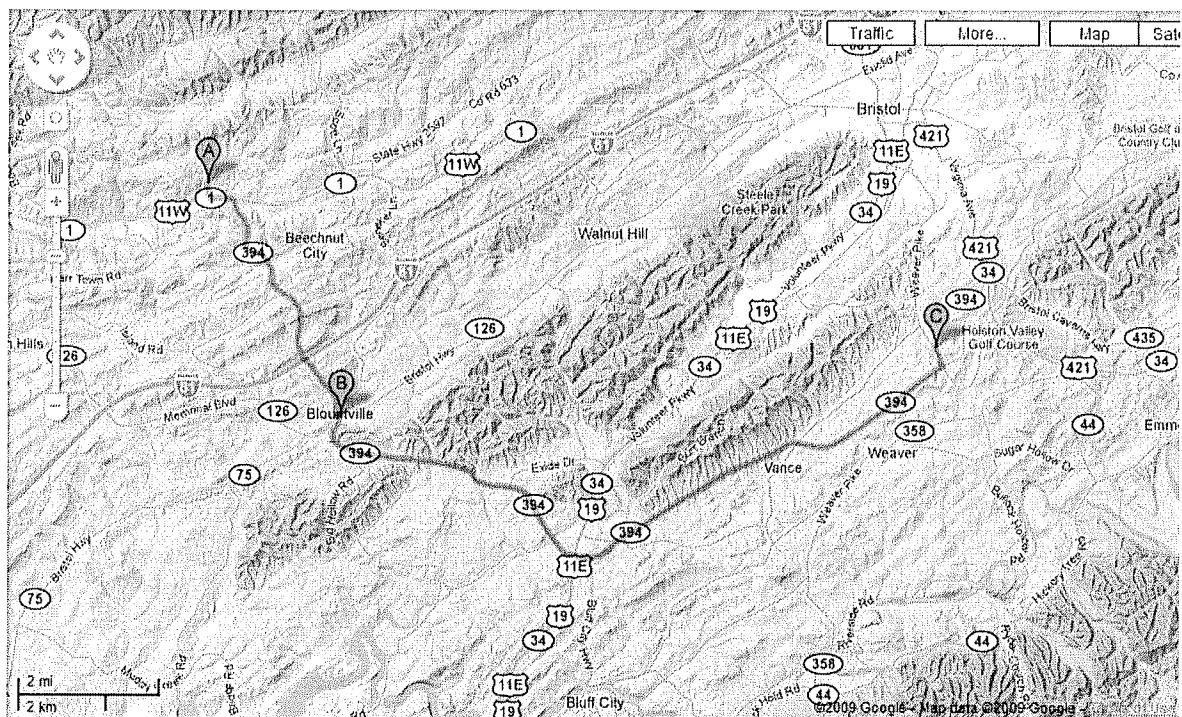
At Home in Blountville

While this paper is primarily interested in Brown as a Lutheran leader, his prominence as an educator was at least as great as his prominence in the southern Lutheran church. Taylor writes, "while recognized as one of the leading ministers of the Lutheran denomination, he is best remembered for his work as an educator. He was a great teacher and his influence for higher education was felt throughout this section."²⁷ Similar sentiments are echoed in his Holston Synod obituary, which claims that his

²⁶ Very unfortunately, this relationship fizzled out until after the Civil War. But in 1872, some Tennessee Synod pastors and laypeople who had moved to Missouri, led by Polycarp C. Henkel, son of David Henkel, met with Dr. Walther in Gravelton, Missouri. After going through a series of theses, they declared fellowship and the English Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri was born. This eventually became the English district of the Missouri Synod. Polycarp, however, returned to North Carolina and the Tennessee Synod, in which he vigorously protested every step that led to the eventual formation of the United Synod South. See R. Yoder Rhyne, "The Tennessee Synod's Contention for the Four Points in the United Synod in the South," Senior Church History Paper (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library, 1981).

²⁷ O. Taylor, *Historic Sullivan*, 255.

students were found among the leading men in Tennessee and Virginia.²⁸



Brown's Tennessee parishes from 1858-1894.

A – Immanuel congregation

B – the Brown plantation in Blountville, near Jefferson Male Academy

C – Beehler's (Beuhler's) congregation

There are several stories recorded in his biographical sketch in Historical Sullivan highlighting his "gentleness and impartiality." He did not compare students. "His school room was a home, the students were his children and he was a father with a heart big enough for them all."²⁹ Several humorous anecdotes are given, detailing his creative way of dealing with mischief, including taking a break from classes to have a fly-swatting competition when the class seemed distracted, and buying his students a bushel of apples when they locked him out of the classroom. With his kind-natured responses he was able to curb the playful mischief of his students and keep it from growing out of control.³⁰

²⁸ J.H. Summit, *Obituary*.

²⁹ O. Taylor, *Historic Sullivan*, 255.

³⁰ O. Taylor, *Historic Sullivan*, 255-257.

He was regionally recognized as a scholar. His alma mater, Emory and Henry, awarded him a Master's degree on the basis of his literary accomplishments a few years after his graduation. In 1873 Roanoke College, awarded Brown with an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree in acknowledgement of his literary capacities. Though he never published a book he wrote extensive articles, which were published in the Lutheran Observer, the Lutheran Standard, the Lutheran, the Lutheran Home, the Lutheran Quarterly, Our Church Paper, and the Lutheran and Missionary. In addition, several of his sermons were published independently.³¹ He was offered editorship of the Lutheran Standard in Ohio but turned down the position, and was elected President of North Carolina College but declined the position twice.³²

His life in Blountville must have been very busy. His eventual home was a large plantation on the west end of town, near Jefferson Academy, which was later partitioned into smaller estates.³³ The primary source of his wealth is uncertain. His duties at the Academy gradually took on more administration and less teaching. He oversaw several building projects and improvements, and helped the school grow in reputation.³⁴

His life as a minister of two parishes, several miles apart, would have involved much riding. Two editorials found in *Our Church Paper* relate what life was like for Lutheran congregations in East Tennessee. In 1883, a visitor to Brown's parish found the man held in high esteem by his congregations and his community. He notes that both congregations were made up of plain, subsistence farmers. Another anonymous editor visited Brown in 1884. By this time, Brown was enjoying the fruits of his labors. Jefferson Academy had a substantial brick building. Two of Brown's sons had graduated from

³¹ Besides Lutheran Publications, he also is reported to have published widely in "literary magazines" (Jenssen, *American Lutheran Biographies*, 115) but unfortunately I have not been able to locate these, though I suspect they may be in some connection with either Roanoke or Emory and Henry College.

³² *Life Sketches*, 30, and Jenssen, *American Lutheran Biographies*, 115.

³³ *Historic Sites*, 142. This should not be taken as an indication that he owned slaves, although this is a possibility. On a related note, while much of Tennessee was pro-Union, Sullivan county was known as pro-confederacy, but it is impossible to say what Brown's feelings were in the matter from the evidence we have now.

³⁴ Jenssen, *American Lutheran Biographies*, 115.

Roanoke College and were serving as successful attorneys in Blountville. He notes how the ministers in that part of the country spent a great deal of time on horseback over large hills, across streams, and on rough roads. But because of their hard labor, the Lutheran churches of the area were thriving. Both editorials also note the stunning beauty of the region.³⁵ Brown was often away, visiting members, attending conferences, and involved in the life of the community. George Cox, in his *Reminiscences of the Founders of the Evangelical Lutheran Holston Synod*, recalls spending a day with Brown as a young man. They visited a rural home, spend the evening discussing theological questions, then departed after family worship the next day.³⁶

The Birth of the Evangelical Lutheran Holston Synod

We left our chronological account of Brown's life in 1859. After ten years of teaching and part-time ministry, having built up a reputation and place in Blountville, he had just taken charge of the two nearest congregations. There were no indications that he was having problems with the Tennessee Synod, in fact he was on the committee in charge of revising its constitution. But we unexpectedly find a lengthy letter at the beginning of the Tennessee Synod's minutes in 1860. It is sent by the collective Tennessee Synod congregations of Eastern Tennessee, petitioning honorable dismissal from the Tennessee Synod so that they can form their own Synod.

They gave several reasons and qualifications to their request for dismissal. This is not, they assure, a rash decision, or a decision based on animosity or dissatisfaction with the Tennessee Synod. The Tennessee congregations were located on the other side of the Appalachian Mountains from their counterparts in the Carolinas and most of Virginia. Travel across the mountains was difficult, so that it

³⁵ *Our Church Paper* (New Market, Virginia), "Letter from Salem," September 6, 1883; and (again) "Letter from Salem," August 1884.

³⁶ G. Cox, *Reminiscences of the Founders of the Evangelical Lutheran Holston Synod* (Spencer, North Carolina: The Spencer Crescent Print, 1915), 13-14.

was expensive and difficult for the Tennessee pastors to cross the mountains for conferences (remember, the Tennessee Synod was located in the Carolinas, and Virginia as well as Tennessee until this point). When conferences were held in Tennessee, the other Tennessee Synod pastors found it more difficult to attend. Thus, their motivation for forming a new synod was purely logistical. They have no intention of changing their doctrinal basis, but of focusing their efforts more intensely on the work in Eastern Tennessee.³⁷ The request was granted, and in December 1860 the Evangelical Lutheran Holston Synod began.³⁸

It is tempting to speculate what other motivations could have been behind the separation. In hindsight, we cannot help but notice the timing of the split, occurring right before the outbreak of the Civil War. East Tennessee was decidedly pro-union, as evidenced by later President Andrew Johnson who came from Greenville, where several prominent Tennessee Synod congregations were located. Thus East Tennessee would have been the only territory within the Tennessee Synod in which the general population preferred the Union to the Confederacy. There is a small hint that these sorts of discussions were occurring. At the end of December 1860 and into early 1861, the Holston Synod held a convention to write its new constitution, where in response to South Carolina's withdrawal from the Union, the synod called all its congregations to hold a day of fasting and prayer over the lamentable condition of the nation.³⁹ Perhaps politics were involved in the decision, but more evidence is needed.

One also wonders if it was true that the Holston Synod had no intentions of changing the doctrinal basis of the synod. After the Civil War, they took a much more liberal position on church

³⁷ As recorded in S. Henkel, *History*, 153-155. In an 1886 discourse, commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Holston Synod, Brown gives identical reasons for the founding of the synod as found original letter of 1860. His remarks are quoted in C.W. Cassell, W. J. Finck, and Elon O. Henkel, eds. *History of the Lutheran Church in Virginia and East Tennessee* (Strasburg VA: Shenandoah Publishing House, 1930), 133-134.

³⁸ Holston is the name of a mountain near Blountville, and a river that flows through Upper East Tennessee.

³⁹ Holston Synod Minutes, 1860, 8, quoted in H.G. Anderson, *Lutheranism in the Southeastern States 1860-1886: A Social History* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), 27.

fellowship. In 1876 the Eastern Conference of the Holston Synod, led by Brown, rejected the Galesburg Rule, and had its actions published in *Our Church Paper* and the *Lutheran and Missionary*. In 1885, Polycarp Henkel, son of David Henkel, refused higher fellowship with the Holston Synod because they would not adopt the four points, though in other respects he was "reminded of the old Tennessee Synod."⁴⁰ It is again tempting to look at these events through hindsight and assume that already in 1860 the future doctrinal differences were anticipated. But the Galesburg rule had not yet been written, and there is no evidence that such discussions were taking place as early as 1860.

Brown was noted for his authority in the small synod. H.G. Anderson notes, "Abel J. Brown for many years its leader, ruled with the same authority that John Bachman once commanded in South Carolina. He was sympathetic to the General Synod South and eventually succeeded in bringing his synod into connection with it."⁴¹ Brown's obituary in the Holston Synod minutes also notes his influential position in the synod, "He was something called the Bishop of the Holston Synod, so powerful was his influence with the body. He might truly be said to have dictated her policy and directed her interests; and when the Synod refused to follow his directions she was generally the loser for it."⁴² Perhaps this move to separate from the Tennessee Synod was led by Brown, consciously or unconsciously, because he liked having such authority and sway, which he had enjoyed from 1838-1842, but had not held to such a degree since then in the Tennessee Synod. It is certainly interesting that Brown served as president of the synod for its first twenty-five years.

⁴⁰ From the Minutes of the Tennessee Synod, quoted by R. Yoder Rhyne, "The Tennessee Synod's Contention for the Four Points in the United Synod in the South," Senior Church History Paper (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library, 1981), 7.

⁴¹ H.G. Anderson, *Lutheranism*, 47-48. This is ironic, since Brown was an opponent of Bachman in 1838, and wrote criticizing the South Carolina Synod, who was later part of the General Synod South. But the South Carolina Synod had grown more confessional since 1838, and perhaps Brown believed that his former publications had been successful.

⁴² J.H. Summit, *Obituary*.

In a funeral sermon delivered at the funeral of Brown's long-time friend Alfred Fox of the Tennessee Synod, Brown recalls a reason for the split which is not explicitly mentioned in either the Holston or Tennessee Synod minutes:

The polity of the synod was found to be no longer adequate to the wants, the purposes and the demands of the Church. It was for this reason unsatisfactory to many intelligent and progressive men, both ministers and laymen, in the Synod. A change of polity was warmly advocated and demanded by some, and opposed with equal warmth by others. Time will not permit me to give a history of the controversy which ensued, nor does this occasion demand it. Suffice it to say that it was conducted in a fraternal spirit; that every inch of the ground in dispute was manfully contested, and that it resulted in a radical change in the original polity of the Synod, in which all the members of Synod now must heartily concur.⁴³

In 1886, speaking at the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Holston Synod, Brown further admits that there were some other considerations that led to the Holston Synod's departure. The Tennessee Synod's constitution was hindering mission work and literary efforts. The constitution left nearly all responsibilities with the congregation, and gave little power to the synod. Recall that Brown had been on a committee to oversee the re-writing of the Tennessee synod's constitution in 1859. Brown later recalls how "for some time before this" there had been "considerable dissatisfaction with the constitution of the Tennessee Synod." He implies that he and others were among the "advocates of reform." This calls to mind how in 1852, he had proposed that the synod form a literary institution, but his suggestion had been tabled and ignored. He and other reformed-minded individuals must have found the new revision of the constitution unsatisfactory, and so rather than attend the convention in which it was ratified in 1860, they formed a new synod. The Holston synod, Brown says, corrected the

⁴³ A.J. Brown, *The Christian's Conflict, Victory, and Reward: Memorial Sermon on the death of Rev. Alfred J. Fox, M.S., delivered in Salem Church, Cocke County, Tennessee, June 7th, 1885* (Philadelphia : Lutheran Publication Society, 1885), 106.

deficiencies of the Tennessee Synod in its own constitution, making mission work, literary institutions, and education a mandatory activity of the synod.⁴⁴

Devastation, Recovery, and Attempts at Union

The Holston Synod was not able to meet and ratify their constitution until 1865 because too few pastors were attending the meets to make quorum. We do not have records for the activity of this period, but it must have been very difficult, with family and friends off fighting. There were several small battles in East Tennessee, including the Battle at Blountville and the Battle of Blue Springs, both of which occurred near Holston Synod congregations.⁴⁵ The entire area was under unfriendly Confederate occupation for most of the war. The important bridges and railroads had all been destroyed. When the war was over, the Holston Synod was no doubt struggling, and looking for friends.

So we have to have at least a degree of sympathy for the situation which led them to eschew their former conservative, Lutheran principles, and join the bandwagon of union through compromise, but sadly that is what happened.⁴⁶ Though they intended to stay faithful to their former practices, they were too eager to join with others before determining doctrinal agreement. First, in 1867, they joined the General Synod South. Brown attended the General Synod's convention in 1868 and reported back that their constitution was satisfactory. But only a few years later the Holston Synod withdrew from the

⁴⁴ The pertinent portion of his address is on page 46 of the 1886 *Minutes of the Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Holston Synod*.

⁴⁵ This section will be shorter than it deserves, because I was unable to obtain a copy of the minutes of the Holston Synod. I was able to look at a copy in the Crumley Archives in Columbia, South Carolina, but I had already spent all my quarters copying other things. A useful project would involve putting all the minutes of the Holston and other small synods on the Internet.

⁴⁶ The sketch of Holston Synod affiliation is primarily drawn from F. Bente, *American Lutheranism*, volume 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1919), 238-241. I confirmed his dates in the minutes of the Holston Synod when visiting the Crumley archives.

General Synod South because the member-synods did not follow the sound Lutheranism of the constitution.

In 1874 the Holston Synod joined the General Council. Brown was present in New York as their representative. They did not send a representative in 1875 to Galesburg when the heavy debate over pulpit and altar fellowship took place. The discussion of church fellowship within the framework of the Galesburg Rule, introduced by their joining the General Council, seems to have caused the Holston Synod to wrestle with fellowship issues. Though the Holston Synod congregations had certainly practiced church fellowship by leaving the General Synod South a few years earlier, Galesburg struck them as going too far. In the March 23, 1876 edition of *Our Church Paper*, a quotation is given from an article Brown originally published in the *Lutheran and Missionary* on "Pulpit and Altar Fellowship." He states that he has never been in favor of indiscriminate pulpit and altar fellowship, yet he has always been opposed to the exclusivity of the Galesburg rule. Then in May 1876, his conference of the Holston Synod adopted the previously mentioned theses rejecting the Galesburg rule as an absolute authority, though they agreed it should be normal practice. Later that summer, the Holston Synod eventually adopted the theses according to the Pittsburg and Akron declarations which allowed for occasional exceptions.

Brown was again present for the General Council conventions in 1876, 1877, 1879, and 1880, but after that the Holston Synod never sent another delegate to the General Council, although it did not request formal dismissal until 1884, when they requested permission to unite with other Lutheran Synods of the South to form a new organization on a "strictly Lutheran basis, provided this could be accomplished," and were granted honorable dismissal.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ *Minutes of the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1884*. Taken from S.E. Ochsenford, *General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication House, 1912), 265. Oddly, the Holston Synod is listed as absent through 1887.

The Great Debate

During this time occurred an absolutely fascinating incident, which is recorded by Cox and in *Historic Sullivan*.⁴⁸ Unfortunately the two accounts differ, and I will relay both, beginning with the latter. A girl of an unspecified denomination was pressured to be re-baptized according to the form of a particular denomination. This led the local Baptist and Methodist preachers in Blountville to challenge each other to a debate, which occurred on June 10th-12th, 1874, in the Methodist Church in Blountville. The debate was widely advertised in papers, and clergy and laity alike from all over the region were in attendance, so that the church could not hold all the spectators. Regional newspapers set up a press area in front of the debaters, almost like a sporting event today. Commentaries and reference books were scattered about the church, with various sides applauding or showing displeasure. The Baptist minister had made banners with the Greek word *baptizo* conjugated, hanging behind him. Abel Brown was selected, along with a Baptist minister from Morristown, as the moderator.

Cox's version of the event differs significantly, but because his were offhanded anecdotes rather than a researched book of local history, it is fair to suspect elaboration. In his version of the story, the Baptist minister had challenged Brown directly. The debate was so well-attended that it had to moved outdoors. Cox also mentions banners, but this time there are multiple verses all in the original languages. The Baptist minister openly boasted that he would annihilate Brown, and with him Lutheranism in Eastern Tennessee. But

When Dr. Brown's time came and he, in that cool, calm, deliberate manner of his, showed complete mastery of the subject, thoroughly answering his opponent at every argument, demolishing the very foundation upon which he had attempted to build, the man subsided; and we never heard anything more from him. It was a great victory for our church. I do not remember hearing of such a debate since that time in these parts.⁴⁹

Compare that to Taylor, who reports:

⁴⁸ G. Cox, *Reminiscences*, 9-10; and O. Taylor, *Historic Sullivan*, 186-188.

⁴⁹ G. Cox, *Reminiscences*, 9-10.

Each debater presented his side ably and to the satisfaction of the side represented, but in other respects there was nothing to make the event remarkable except the length of it [...] And if these worthy men had never done else in their lives recording, this event alone deserves to be remembered as having united the people of that town and vicinity in friendlier fellowship than before.⁵⁰

This event would be a fascinating topic to investigate further, and I hope someone close to Blountville will be able to track down references in the local papers of the time. If Taylor's account is correct, there should be multiple records in papers across the region.

Salisbury, 1884

The formation of the United Synod in the South could easily become another paper, but will here only be considered as an aspect of Abel Brown's career. Specifically, he reported this to the Holston Synod as a great victory for confessional Lutheranism. The Virginia Synod, North Carolina Synod, and South Carolina had all grown more confessional over time. The Tennessee Synod began discussions with them, but rather than simply have the Tennessee Synod join the General Synod South, Tennessee in 1883 proposed that a diet be held to create a new organization on the doctrinal platform of the entire Lutheran Confessions.⁵¹ In 1884 the diet was held in Salisbury, North Carolina, over which Abel Brown was elected president. This is interpreted in his obituary as recognition that "perhaps to him, more than to any other one man, are due the initiatory steps towards the formation of our United Synod."⁵² The

⁵⁰ O. Taylor, *Historic Sullivan*, 188.

⁵¹ For the official documents leading up to this union, see R. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 118-137. During this time period, several editorials appear in *Our Church Paper*, some of them by Abel Brown, advocating a true union among southern Lutherans. Other articles appear, notably by Polycarp Henkel, but also others, warning against the dangers of outward union without full doctrinal union. The debate between Brown and Henkel would also make an interesting topic of further study.

⁵² J.H. Summit, *Obituary*.

diet produced a document called, *Basis of a More General Union Among the Evangelical Lutheran Synods in the South*.⁵³

It is easy to look at this development in light of what later transpired and assume this was a compromise of the confessional principles originally held by the Tennessee and Holston Synods. But this document and its subsequent ratification were seen by the Holston and Tennessee Synods as a victory for confessional Lutheranism in the South. The *Basis* clearly requires that strict adherence to the complete Book of Concord be the basis of the union. The union was also less binding than we may imagine. Its aim was not to replace the member synods, but to provide for their worship books, liturgies, seminaries, charitable institutions, and missions. Even the Lutheran Witness, a Missouri Synod publication from Zanesville, Ohio, edited by C.A. Frank, had to admit, "The Basis is certainly good, and if it is not a mere profession of the letter without the spirit of the Lutheran Confessions, as in the General Council, we will rejoice over the progress in the Lutheran direction which some of the synods seem to be willing to make."⁵⁴

Confessionally, this was a large step in the right direction for the North Carolina Synod, the South Carolina Synod, the Virginia Synod, and all of the synods except the Holston and Tennessee Synods. Brown must have felt wonderful about moving the other synods to a better confessional position. After all, the Holston Synod and the Tennessee Synod were not forced to compromise their stances at all. However, the elephant in the room was that the union had failed to address the four points. Though this did not create a stir in the Holston Synod, it caused controversy in the Tennessee Synod.

⁵³ R. Wolf gives the text of this document, *Documents*, 132-135.

⁵⁴ "The Work of a Diet for a more General Organic Union Among the 'Ev. Luth. Synods of the South,'" December 7, 1884.

The Tennessee Synod and the Four Points

I will provide a brief digression on the subject, "When did the Tennessee Synod cease being confessional?" Polycarp Henkel had been elected vice president of the Diet of Salisbury. His interpretation of the whole affair was quite different than the triumphal view expressed in Holston Synod writings. In the 1885 discussion of the diet at the Tennessee Synod convention, Henkel and pastor A.L. Crouse requested that it be stated in the records that they refused to approve the constitution of the proposed United Synod, not because of anything it contained, but because it did not contain a clear statement on the four points.⁵⁵ Later, as a delegate to the Holston Synod convention, Henkel refrained from what he terms "higher fellowship" because they had adopted the basis of union without addressing the four points.⁵⁶

It briefly seemed that Polycarp's strictness brought about the desired results. The Tennessee Synod adopted the basis for agreement and joined the new United Synod in the South, but only ratified the agreement in 1886 under the conditions that no exchanges of pulpits with non-Lutherans or open communion be practiced, nor any Chiliasm taught, nor any members be allowed to join secret societies. The United Synod acquiesced, and in 1887 added such a clause to its constitution. And from there... the issue was tabled. It needed to be adopted by the member synods, but only Tennessee approved it. It was often discussed, but the clause insisting on the four points was never adopted by the majority of the member synods. Things remained in limbo for a generation. Tennessee remained essentially a non-participating member of the United Synod in the South, persistently waiting for the four points clause to be adopted by the other member synods.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ R. Yoder Rhyne, "Contention," 12. His entire essay details the fight that some Tennessee Synod pastors continued to wage until 1917 on behalf of the four points.

⁵⁶ R. Yoder Rhyne, "Contention," 7.

⁵⁷ More detail is given in R. Yoder Rhyne, "Contention," 12-23.

In 1894, nine Tennessee Synod congregations had written the synod, petitioning them to leave the United Synod in the South. They lost by a vote of twenty to thirty-one. This seems to have been the point of no return for the Tennessee Synod. They would remain in this union even though there were irresolvable doctrinal differences. Though certain members of the synod continued to publish polemic against false union, those voices slowly faded,⁵⁸ until the Tennessee merged into the North Carolina Synod in 1921.⁵⁹

An Impressive Exit

Accounts of Brown's life tend to treat 1884 as the highlight. The next decade of his life is glossed over with the assumption that he continued serving his congregation, teaching and administrating Jefferson Male Academy, and writing. A routine duty of his was to preach at funerals, and he preached one such sermon in Buehlers Church on June 3, 1894. The title was *Nightless Day in the Home of the Blest*, about the joys and happiness of heaven. He spoke the following about the happiness of heaven:

Two conditions are absolutely essential to perfect happiness. One is the utter absence of all evil or pain; the other is the actual presence of all good, or pleasure. These conditions are both physical and mental, and may exist fully or partially, and the happiness of the subject will accordingly be complete or partial, as the case may be. In heaven both conditions exist fully and its happiness is therefore complete.⁶⁰

Upon these words he grew faint and fell over. He lingered another month, during which he expressed regret that he had not immediately died while preaching, but rejoiced that God had allowed him to retain his mental clarity to the end. He died on July 17, 1884.⁶¹ He was an important leader who

⁵⁸ It would require careful study to determine exactly which congregations left the Tennessee Synod for the Missouri Synod, but St. John's, the church where David Henkel is buried, and Abel Brown was baptized, is on the list. The majority of a certain Zion congregation near Knoxville, Tennessee, departed the Holston Synod and started a new Missouri Synod congregation in 1899.

⁵⁹ Keep in mind that the Tennessee Synod was primarily located in the Carolinas

⁶⁰ A.J. Brown, *Nightless Day in the Home of the Blest* (New Market, Virginia]: Henkel Press, 1894), 6.

⁶¹ J.H. Summit, *Obituary*.

tried to use his gifts to promote confessional Lutheranism in the United States. His general success to that end should not be overlooked because of his compromises. We can even be sympathetic to some degree for his failure to grasp the importance of practicing strict church fellowship, because he did not have the benefit of hindsight as we do now. But seeing how his very small compromises only opened the door to the very slow process which led to today's ELCA, we do well to learn from his example and refuse to compromise even what seems like the smallest point of doctrine.

His Works

While Krauth's opening quotation could have been a bit of hyperbole, and while we in the Wisconsin Synod will not appreciate everything he wrote, particularly on the subject of church fellowship, his writings are still worth considering. The following will list the works I have had opportunity to examine in their chronological order, followed by those which are known to exist but I have not seen, and then places where more of his works may be found.

Reviewed Work of Abel J. Brown

- 1838 - *A vindication of the Evangelical Lutheran Tennessee Synod, on the Doctrine and Discipline of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Salem, North Carolina: Blum & Son). This work is discussed above. It quotes liberally from Luther and David Henkel on the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper, against Lutherans who had departed from it in South Carolina.
- 1883 - *The divine formula for the administration of the Lord's Supper : sermon, delivered in Immanuel and Buehler's Churches, Sullivan County, Tennessee, in April, 1883* (Bristol, Tennessee: J.L. King). This sermon seems to be born out of controversy, because the first fifteen pages are devoted to proving that the formula administered in the Lord's Supper is important and not to be altered. He then argues that Lutherans should use the formula "Take, eat, this is the body of Christ which is given for you; do this in remembrance of him," and similarly for the cup, in the distribution of the Lord's Supper.
- 1885 – *The Christian's Conflict, Victory, and Reward: Memorial Sermon on the death of Rev. Alfred J. Fox, M.S., delivered in Salem Church, Cocke County, Tennessee, June 7th, 1885* (Philadelphia : Lutheran Publication Society). This memorial sermon preached on 2 Timothy 4:7-8, first states that the Christian life is a race or a contest against the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh, in which our charge is to keep the faith. But on the day of Christ's return, those who keep the faith

will be given a glorious crown of righteousness , won by Christ. The late Rev. Fox kept the faith as a minister in the Tennessee Synod for forty-seven years, and is now enjoying the crown prepared for him.

1885 – *Historical Address*, printed in the Minutes of the Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Holston Synod, 1886. This address traces the history of Lutheranism in Northeast Tennessee and the occasions that gave rise to the Holston Synod. He notes the successes of the past twenty-five years: a solid Lutheran confession basis maintained, several ministers produced, several missions established, improvements in the training of pastors, and a cultivation of true Christian piety among her members.

1893 - *Synodical sermon : the perfection of God's plan of human Salvation* (New Market, Virginia: Henkel Press). This was originally appended to the 1893 Minutes of the Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Holston Synod. He explains that man is incapable of finding a way of salvation on his own, and meets dead ends in attempting to do so, but God has provided complete and perfect salvation. Only the gospel in word and sacrament have the power to save. Therefore, the work of the synod is to use those means, and nothing else.

1894 - *Nightless day in the home of the blest : sermon, partly delivered in Weaver's Church, Sullivan County, Tennessee, Sunday morning, June 3, 1894* (New Market, Virginia: Henkel Press). This sermon tells of the joys of heaven using imagery from the book of Revelation. He never finished preaching it, but it was published posthumously.

Other Listed Works of Abel J. Brown

Our Church Paper gives extracts of several longer articles published by Brown in the *Lutheran and Missionary*, including: "The Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," "Pulpit and Altar Fellowship," The Baptism of the Holy Ghost and of Fire," and "The Southern Lutheran Diet."

1867 - *The Christian minister delineated and moral influence exerted after death : sermon occasioned by the death of Rev. Adam Miller, Sen., delivered at Poor Valley and Zion's Churches, Washington Co., Virginia, August, 1844* (Knoxville : Brownlow & Haws).

1870 - *The Lutheran Church built on the only true foundation sermon* (Philadelphia : Lutheran Book Store)

1880 - *Portraiture of Lutheranism in its fundamental principles : and some of its distinctive doctrinal features : sermon, preached at the dedication of St. Mary's Lutheran Church, Monroe County, Tenn., October 26, 1879* (Bristol, Tenn. : Printed at the "Daily Argus" Office).

? - *The importance of divine truth in its integrity and purity* – only found at Gettysburg Seminary.

? – *Odell Funeral* (East Tennessee Historical Society Pub. #31) – unable to find.

O. Taylor's biography lists "The Heavenly Country" as another published sermon.

Finally, more writings could probably be found scattered throughout *Our Church Paper, the Lutheran Standard, the Lutheran and Missionary, the Lutheran Church Visitor, the Lutheran Observer, the Lutheran Home, Lutheran Quarterly*, and various other Lutheran periodicals of the time. Publications connected to Blountville, Emory and Henry College, and Roanoke College are also likely to contain something written by Brown.

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