

The Protestant Controversy

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When the Protes'tant Controversy surfaces in our circles, as it has a way of doing every ten or fifteen years, certain events occur as predictably and inevitably as tax payments in April and Minnesota blizzards in December. Any such occasion will produce up-to-date versions of a long line of articles in *Faith-Life* under the heading, "Why I Became a Protes'tant."¹ The accounts will tell and retell allegedly the story of bungling district officials, misguided congregations and blind-following-the-blind ouster resolutions.

There will be traumatic experiences for the congregations directly involved and for their called ministers. There can be dissent and opposition altars, especially when a gifted and energetic pastor is mounting the protest.

There will also always be a renewed interest in the continuing "Protes'tant Controversy" when such a surfacing occurs. The renewed concern can assert itself near Fremont or Green Bay and also as far afield as Rochester, Minnesota. It can involve conferences and districts, students at synodical schools and members of special societies. In the last few years the essayist has discussed the topic at a conference in the Fremont-Green Bay area, a student forum at Northwestern College, a meeting of the Synod's Historical Institute and today at the Minnesota District Pastoral Conference.²

In connection with such periodic renewal of attention to the Protes'tant Controversy the thought may suggest itself to some that we may have been neglectful between times. Should we perhaps not be much more concerned about the subject, not only in season, but also out of season?

Certainly, that is what the Protes'tants themselves have told us and still tell us. Long ago they were incensed when there was unwillingness to enter into every aspect of every grievance over every past incident in the origins of the conflict. They refuted over and over again and still refute the declaration, "*Die Vorgeschichte geht uns nichts an.*"³ When the Minnesota District made an attempt over a half century ago to investigate both sides of the conflict, its efforts were rebuffed by the one side with the charge that there had not been enough reading and studying of *Faith-Life*.⁴ Today anyone involved with the Protes'tants Controversy who admits that he does not know the whole history must be ready for the suggestion that it is about time for him to get at his homework.

It is certainly understandable that Protes'tants are deeply concerned about every aspect of the Protes'tant Controversy. This is where they live. This is their *raison d'être*.

It is true that the Controversy represents in the history of the Wisconsin Synod one of the major internal events and intramural conflicts that have occurred. No one would want to write off as inconsequential the strife between those who had been brothers, the turmoil at two synodical schools, the clash between two theological giants, the losses in congregation and called workers. All that merits attention and concern.

At the same time it should be realized that there are other concerns that claim attention. We cannot concentrate our whole energy on one single episode three score years old, traumatic and dramatic as it may be. We cannot be totally busy attempting to settle a conflict that has defied the best-intentioned settlements of the past. We need not apologize if we do not know the whole long, sad story as well as the Protes'tants know it.

This may sound like the usual excusing that fills the introductions to the conference and district papers we write. In a way that is just what it is. The essayist does not feel at all competent to fulfill the assignment, as

¹ Examples are the personal accounts of Floyd Brand, Robert Christmann and Michael Hanke in recent issues of *Faith-Life*, the Protes'tant publication produced continuously since Easter 1928. Here after references to the periodical will be given as *F-L* with an *a* or *b* added to the usual issue and page designation. *Faith-Life* has usually used a two-column per page format. Hence the special alphabetical addition to the citations. A "*F-L sup.*" designation will indicate a reference to a documentary insertion appearing with special pagination in certain *Faith-Life* issues.

² The only published record of these proceedings is "The Parting of Professor J. P. Koehler and the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary" in *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, I, Fall 1983, pp. 36-47.

³ Pastor Brenner is supposed to have coined the phrase. An early example of Protes'tant objections is found in *F-L.*, November 26, 1928, p. 66.

⁴ The 1930 Beitz letter to the Minnesota District charges, "From the nature of your resolutions it becomes evident that you have been remiss now for a period of more than two years in not reading *Faith-Life* and for that reason are not up to the times." The letter appears in *F-L* August 1930, p. 66.

described in your secretary's letter, to present "a paper laying out the full history, cause, points and personalities of the Protes'tant Controversy."⁵

Some knowledge of the subject the essayist may have, but not that much. He confesses to a long interest in the subject that stretches from student days at the Seminary to a teaching post there that involves synodical history. Almost a half century ago, he began to read *Faith-Life* in the upstairs Seminary library. Copies of the periodical were stacked haphazardly in the periodical room and specific issues were not always easy to find. What made the reading even more difficult was the temperature in the unheated room. Not even the heated attacks in the early *Faith-Life* issues could supply warmth for the reader. Now the essayist can read *Faith-Life* articles in much more pleasant surroundings but that does not say by any means that he has become so expert that he knows all the answers for this complicated section of our synodical story.

Be that as it may, a paper on the Protes'tant Controversy has been attempted. The outline in your hands indicates line of thought and major sections and subdivisions. There is generous spacing to allow you to note any questions you hope—probably vainly—to have answered or any comments you wish to make, especially if they are of the favorable kind.

Brief attention should also be given in this introductory section to bibliographical matters. The bulk of such material is to be found in the volumes of *Faith-Life*, published since Easter 1928. Originally it appeared twice every month but is now down to once every two months. In this three-foot shelf item with most pages filled with crowded double columns the quantity is there. What about quality?

Given the quantity, the quality is bound to be uneven. Essays presenting Bible studies, especially those by J. P. Koehler are valuable and edifying. Certain sections of his *Kirchengeschichte* appear in translation. *Faith-Life* also presented the original printing of Koehler's *History of the Wisconsin Synod*.⁶ Because the *Faith-Life* pages were simply reproduced when the material was published in book form, this definitive work, indispensable for any serious student of early Wisconsin Synod history, appears in such unattractive format that it is more likely to repel than to attract the reader. Incidentally, the book might be appearing under Northwestern Publishing House imprint without the Jordahl introduction and in more fitting format. The book was offered to our Commission on Christian Literature at the time the Protes'tant Conference determined on publication. But the Commission declined on the grounds that the book would not sell.⁷ The book is now well into its second edition.

Those interested in finding out the whole story of single episodes in the long Protes'tant Controversy will find the material on *Faith-Life* pages. Most of the Protes'tant pastors have written up in detail the story of their conflict with the Wisconsin Synod. On the more objective side *Faith-Life* has rendered a service by reprinting the early important documents of the Controversy: The Beitz paper, the Seminary Faculty *Gutachten* the Koehler *Beleuchtung*, the Pieper-Meyer *Antwort* and others. As a fiftieth anniversary contribution the last two 1978 issues of *Faith-Life* reprinted the Beitz essay, a translation of the *Gutachten* and the Paul Hensel analysis of both with the title, "The Wauwatosa Gospel: Which Is It?"

A Protes'tant summary of the conflict is provided in the introduction to Koehler's *History of the Wisconsin Synod*. It was written by Leigh Jordahl who studied at Northwestern, has served at two Lutheran seminaries and has been a member of several Lutheran synods. His preface to the Koehler history, covering some thirty crowded pages, has the title, "John Philipp Koehler, the Wauwatosa Theology and the Wisconsin Synod." It presents the Protes'tant side of the story, as does much of the *Faith-Life* writing previously mentioned.

What of the other side of the story? There has not been much such writing. This dearth should not be mistaken as evidence that the Synod has so many skeletons to hide in so many closets that it dare not write its

⁵ Letter from Pastor Alfred Jannusch to E. C. Fredrich dated June 20, 1983.

⁶ John Philip Koehler, *History of the Wisconsin Synod* (St. Cloud, Minnesota: Sentinel Publishing Company for the Protes'tant Conference, 1970). A second edition, necessitated when senior church history class at the Seminary bought out the first edition, appeared in 1981. Hereafter cited as Koehler, *History*, with references to the first edition.

⁷ *F-L* March-April 1969, p. 20a, reports the matter and *F-L*, May-June, p. 7a, reprints the Commission's letter that declined the offer.

story. From the very beginning there was general agreement not to reply to personal attacks in *Faith-Life* and to write little more than official notices and resolutions. The reason was to avoid as much conflict as possible and to put no unnecessary “paper fences” in the way of a desired settlement. The Protes’tants were being taken at their word when they called themselves Protes’tant Conference. It was assumed that agreement could be reached with a “conference,” albeit a protesting one.

Some few writings have appeared recently. Elmer Kiessling in his anniversary history of the Western Wisconsin District devotes brief chapters to “Stormy Weather – the Beitz Paper.”⁸ Among several research papers on various aspects of the subject, a general overview of the subject, widely reproduced for study purposes, by Mark Jeske is worthy of mention.⁹ The second issue of the Wisconsin Lutheran Synod’s Historical Institute *Journal* carried a discussion of the Koehler-Seminary troubles.¹⁰ Other titles could be mentioned but for the most part the reader or researcher will have to “hunt and peck” for the Synod’s side of the story until an update of Koehler’s synodical history is available.¹¹

I. Setting the Stage for Strife

The beginning of the controversy is usually traced way back to 1924 when the Watertown Board – Faculty dispute over disciplining thieving students created two factions at war with one another and a so-called “third party” also. Perhaps the roots of conflict reach back even farther to 1917 when the merger of the four federated synods of the church body took place.

As far as outward appearances are concerned, the merger was accomplished with a minimum of friction. This is especially true of the “other states” of the merger, Minnesota, Michigan and Nebraska. Here the built-in synodical leadership and bureaucracy simply transferred itself into a district counterpart. Not too much more than change of names and titles was required.

In Wisconsin, however, it was a different story. Here the old synodical leadership moved up to serve the merged body. Three new districts were formed and there was a lack of experienced personnel to fill the many leadership posts. Brethren, used to seeing one another frequently at synodical conventions, now seldom went to or met one another at such conventions and encountered only one-third of the old group at district meetings. And at that era’s counterpart of last year’s North Avenue and this year’s Mayfair Road new synodical machinery had to be broken in, a lot of it.

It is understandable that there were some false starts, some clashing of gears, some outright breakdowns at the synodical level and especially at the district level in Wisconsin. It was easy to make a vague but hated *Beamtentum* the goat of all difficulties. The situation lent itself to an anti-establishment mood. Anyone perusing the old records of the Protes’tant Controversy is struck by this distaste for officialdom, this commitment to the belief that the worst of all worsts is *Beamtentum*. As has been said, the officialdom was weak in the days when the Controversy erupted within Wisconsin districts. But the point is not now to catalog failing and faults but rather to emphasize the anti-establishment character of the Protes’tant movement. This may well be the key to understanding the whole complex development.

Actually, anti-establishmentarianism was a key feature of the Twenties. A scofflaw attitude prevailed in that decade over against the old mores and morality, the old order and authority, the old and the new laws. One would be hard put to provide hard evidence that the times alone spawned Protestantism in our church body. But our church body existed in and was influenced by the Twenties. The decade provided a mood and a mindset. It was an era of rivalry on the national and world scene between the revolutionary and the reactionary. It proved

⁸ Elmer C. Kiessling, *The History of the Western Wisconsin District* (Special District printing, 1970), pp. 16-28. Hereafter cited as *Kiessling*.

⁹ The paper is on file at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library.

¹⁰ E. C. Fredrich, “The Parting of Professor J. P. Koehler and the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary” in *Journal*, Fall 1983, pp. 36-47.

¹¹ In his concern for objectivity Koehler, who was so personally involved, avoided more than a mere mention of the subject.

to be that also on the synodical scene. Boards and officials at district and synodical level were challenged by Protes'tants.

As the turbulent Twenties began, there were special problems that threatened the peace and harmony of our church. In a time when shortfalls in the synodical treasury were a way of life, a major building operation was planned for the Seminary and also for New Ulm. Despite "pay-as-you-build" safeguards, many were disturbed at the combination of budgetary deficits and building collections. In 1984 it is easy to understand the concerns.

Paul Hensel in his 1928 *Wauwatosa Gospel* describes the unrest in this way:

Five years ago we were engaged in gather funds for the new seminary building. We threw ourselves into the harness for the undertaking and met our quota. We were afire for this task. Our congregations were also willing. Yet it involved work. While we were in the midst of it, Pieper returned from Germany and traveled about agitating against the project. Pastor Brenner, member of the building committee, and others, are able to attest to this. It hurt. It was the first blow.¹²

The triumvirate that fostered the Wauwatosa Theology was no more. In past theological issues, as Koehler testifies, "the Wisconsin faculty stood over against others."¹³ He is referring especially to the issues of analogy of faith and of church and ministry. By 1924, however, John Schaller's steadying hand had been stilled by death. Koehler and Pieper, old schoolmates at Watertown and St. Louis and also colleagues at Wauwatosa and in its great church-ministry endeavors, were no longer seeing eye-to-eye. Troubles were brewing.

II. Rock River Rumbles

They first came to a boil, not at Wauwatosa, but along the banks of the Rock River, about which Black Hawk had once said, "Rock River is a beautiful country ... I fought for it ... Keep it as we did." Along the banks of that river, by then badly polluted, the first skirmishes of the Protes'tant Controversy were fought. It all began at Watertown and at its Lutheran college, Northwestern.

In early spring 1924 wholesale thieving, involving some two dozen students, was uncovered by the tutors.¹⁴ The faculty took swift action, establishing three quite equally divided groups and applying to each group appropriate punishments. The worst offenders were expelled. A second group was suspended for the rest of the year. The third group was allowed to remain at school but with campus restrictions. That could have ended the matter. But it did not.

Relying on a dead-letter statute that vested the expulsion power with the board, not the faculty, the school's governing board set aside the faculty's disciplinary actions. There was naturally a bitter wrangle between board and faculty. Two teachers resigned in protest. They volunteered to teach for the faculty but not the board. The faculty was willing; the board naturally vetoed the arrangement. On Commencement Day the Watertown campus was graced by a specially summoned informational meeting at which the pro-faculty side of the dispute was heard.¹⁵ The Synod established committees to sort out the facts and to establish principles. The Wisconsin-Chippewa Valley Conference became deeply involved and at a Wisconsin Rapids meeting heard the Synod's president accused of misrepresenting the facts in the case.

At the time much debate centered on such questions as how the Watertown problem was handled by faculty and by board and how it should have been handled by them. The real issue, however, was board power

¹² Paul Hensel, *The Wauwatosa Gospel: Which Is It?* (Marshfield, Wisconsin, 1928), paragraphs 117-118, as quoted in *F-L*, November-December, 1978, 22b.

¹³ Koehler, *History*, p. 255.

¹⁴ Details of the whole affair can be found in "Faculty and Board Reports" that appear in *F-L* sup. from October 1940 to January 1941.

¹⁵ *F-L* sup. from July to September 1940 provides the "Watertown Transcript."

asserting itself. It was a matter of establishment authority. There were not a few who were minded to challenge that authority but could not easily do so at Watertown, where the board had things under control.

Some twenty miles south on the Rock River at Fort Atkinson a better opportunity for protest developed. Two women teachers became embroiled with congregation officials and the pastor. The teachers took a dim view of what individuals and groups in the congregation were doing and wanted practices they deemed objectionable stopped. The pastor was reluctant to oppose what he considered adiaphora. A clash resulted with the pastor calling the teachers “*freche Gruenschnabel*” and the teachers calling the pastor a false prophet. Under fire and without a release, the teachers were recommended to and called by the Marshfield congregation. The Fort Atkinson congregation was upset, so upset it even withdrew for a time from the Synod.

As the Fort Atkinson case dragged on it became more and more complicated. Protests and counter-protests were filed by the teachers and by the Fort Atkinson congregation, by groups supporting the teachers and by groups opposing them. Committee after committee tried to settle the matter. Meeting after meeting came up with a variety of decisions. Few shared the views of the teachers that had originally caused the conflict or of the tactics they had then employed. But a good many had begun to have doubts about the way the case had been handled since then, especially when a notice of the suspension of the two teachers was published in May 1926.

A month later the Western Wisconsin District met at Beaver Dam. Among other items on the agenda was a proposal to ratify the suspension of the teachers that was voted on favorably by a majority. A group of seventeen, however, protested in writing that action.¹⁶ From that time on the term *Protes'tants* has been in use. Professor Pieper, very active at Beaver Dam, is supposed to have used it, somewhat disparagingly, in the first instance and those so dubbed regarded the epithet as accolade.¹⁷

Two other significant happenings at Beaver Dam merit mention. Both enlarge the problem and pave the way to a definite Protes'tant Controversy. For one thing, those protesting added to their complaints about suspension procedure an item that referred to a “bigger problem” that was the root of the issue and which they wanted discussed. The problem, as they saw it, was officialdom.¹⁸ It would soon have a larger airing.

The other significant matter was the Beaver Dam resolution that presidents should deal conclusively with dissidents.¹⁹ Soon there would be a rash of suspensions and the formation of a Protes'tant Conference. First, however, there would have to be that airing of the “bigger problem.”

III. Divisive Documents Debated

The occasion was a meeting of the Wisconsin-Chippewa Valleys Conference at Schofield, near Wausau in September 1926. There William Beitz read a paper actually assigned to him by the area mixed conference with the title, “God’s Message to Us in Galatians: The Just Shall Live by Faith.” Three weeks later it was read to the conference that had originally assigned it. The paper would have many other readings, a few public but mostly private. The paper would have many other readings, a few public but mostly private. It is still being read today by those assigned papers on Protes'tants

Beitz used the great Reformation passage in Habakkuk and Galatians as a launching pad for an aggressive attack on the spiritual life in the Wisconsin Synod. The passage was to set the tone that would test harps “to see whether they be in tune with Gods.”²⁰ The test, according to Beitz, showed a miserable failure in

¹⁶ *Western Wisconsin District Proceedings*, 1926, pp. 31-34.

¹⁷ *Kiessling*, p. 19.

¹⁸ *Western Wisconsin District Proceedings*, 1926, p. 33.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁰ Since the *Faith-Life* 1978 September-October issue’s reprint of the Beitz paper is the most readily accessible, references to the paper will be made via that issue. This reference is to *F-L* September-October 1978, p. 2a. It is striking that in the next sentence following the “harp” quotation Beitz writes, “this letter is written not for the purpose that we may see what is happening to the Galatian Christians, but that we may see what is happening to us.” It is not likely that Beitz would have read the opening paragraph of Karl Barth’s *Roemerbrief* by 1926 and therefore the similarity is all the more remarkable.

congregational life, in preaching, in Seminary training, in catechetical endeavors, in just about every aspect of “living by faith.”

At every reading of the Beitz paper questions were raised, chiefly about the sweeping condemnations expressed there in. With the open and as yet undercover Protes’tants rallying around the paper and with those of another mind finding fault, something had to be done. An official estimation of the paper was sought by beleaguered Western Wisconsin District officials from the Wauwatosa theological faculty. This gave rise to the second divisive document, the Wauwatosa Seminary’s evaluation of the Beitz paper usually referred to simply as the *Gutachten*.

That *Gutachten* took the Beitz paper to task on these three counts: 1) it mixed justification and sanctification by using the justification passage in Galatians as a pretext for a sanctification discussion; 2) it harbored erroneous statements about the role of the Law in repentance; 3) it judged hearts and slandered. The *Gutachten* had been carefully written. This was the procedure as one of the participants described it:

In order to be as correct and careful as possible, it was determined in this important matter affecting the peace and unity of the Synod that each of the four of us should make a written appraisal without prior consultation with the others, that then the four appraisals should be jointly evaluated and then brought together by one of us. The amalgamation should then be again reviewed and after that put into final form.²¹

The *Gutachten* would obviously be debated and contested by Protestants. It was a divisive document in this respect. And also in another. It made the synodical strife the Seminary’s strife. Already by 1927 the Seminary had lost a faculty member, Gerhard Ruediger. He had been energetic in the 1924 Watertown commencement meeting. He had espoused the cause of the Fort Atkinson teachers. He was an avowed advocate of the view that the Wisconsin Synod was ripe and ready for God’s judgment. He advocated his views in his classroom. His colleagues, Koehler excepted, felt that even a belated and enforced confession could not avail to rectify the situation. Ruediger lost his teaching post.²²

When Ruediger was in his troubles, Koehler stood aside. He had been on leave, far off in Germany to research the roots of the Synod whose history he was to write. By the time he returned the conflict was already going strong. His own son was in that exclusive group to be known as “the third party,” third between the board at Watertown and the disgruntled faculty. Karl Koehler was one of the two who resigned at Watertown in 1924. Professor J.P. Koehler was obviously not overjoyed when his protege, Ruediger, and his son Karl had to vacate their teaching post. But he was 4000 miles away when the troubles started in both cases and therefore took himself out of the role of judge.

The *Gutachten* was another matter. Koehler failed to write his evaluation of the Beitz paper. He said he was busy with blue prints of the proposed Seminary building project north of Milwaukee. He, however, signed the *Gutachten* but with the stipulation that he could discuss the matter with Beitz before the document’s release. When the *Gutachten* was released before that discussion, Koehler withdrew his signature.

The divisive issue eventually became a question of interpretation principles. Koehler insisted that the Beitz paper should be given the benefit of doubt and of the best construction. His colleagues insisted that a conference paper, especially one that had helped engender its share of controversy, should be judged in the interest of clarity on its own merits, on its own wording. The key issue became *Wortlaut*.

As the controversy worsened, this division at Wauwatosa loomed larger and larger. Divisive documents were being interpreted in different ways at Wauwatosa. The situation was intolerable. Something had to give. Something did. The event will be described subsequently.

²¹ The quotation is from the Pieper-Meyer *Antwort to Koehler’s Beleuchtung* and is found on p. 8.

²² Eventually Gerhard Ruediger found his way back into the Wisconsin Synod after a bitter strife with Protes’tants.

A valiant effort was made to justify the Beitz paper over against the *Gutachten*. This is Paul Hensel's 'The Wauwatosa Gospel' Which Is It?²³ It sought to quote Pieper against Pieper by citing previous Pieper writings that resembled statements of Beitz in his paper that the *Gutachten* opposed. The resemblance could easily be substantiated. What was left out of consideration, however, was the Koehler contention that "circumstances alter cases," that more than the *Wortlaut* should be considered.

August Pieper would subsequently insist that his writings that were cited had been written abstractly while the Beitz writing was aimed at a concrete situation. There is merit in the contention. It is vain to argue that the call, "Fire," deserves equal evaluation if uttered when a building is ablaze or when shouted in a crowded building that is not afire.

Whatever the evaluation, certain documents were helping to create division. Soon an opposition fellowship was in the process of formation.

IV. Faith-Life Fellowship Formed

The first get-together of those who would soon form a protesting conference took place in mid-November 1926 at Wilton. The purpose seems to have been to form ranks behind the Beitz paper that was under attack, even before any *Gutachten* was issued. Plans to print the paper in quantity were considered but no action was taken at that time.

Early in February the group met again, this time at Marshfield where O. Hensel was under fire. A *Faith-Life* summary of events says, "This was the first meeting of the protes'tants 'mit Gottesdienst und Abendmahl.'"²⁴

The first suspensions of protesters occurred in June 1927. O. Hensel and W. Motzkus, Beaver Dam protesters, were the first to be so dealt with. Motzkus had been called to Globe and O. Hensel installed him in spite of protests. H. W. Kock at Friesland clashed with congregation and district officials, lost the congregation and was suspended. In July Beitz was suspended when meetings and correspondence failed to bring about any agreement. The notice of suspension reached Beitz when Professor Koehler was visiting him to discuss the paper a second time.²⁵ A fifth suspension, that of W. K. Bodamer, also was announced in July. In September protesters met formally at Elroy and this time resolved to print the Beitz paper.

At a Special Western Wisconsin District meeting at Watertown, Nov. 1518 the District took its stand with the *Gutachten* and against the Beitz and passed the resolution which declared that all who upheld the Beitz paper were to be regarded as such who had severed their relations with the Synod. Naturally there were negative notes and abstentions. These were to be dealt with.²⁶ This development crystallized the protest movement.

In mid-December the Protes'tants met at Marshfield. They defeated a proposal to break off all relations with the Synod, but they did establish a treasury, a board, a LaCrosse mission, and an editorial committee. The Protes'tants were definitely in business. Most important of all, they adopted the "Elroy Declaration," so called because it was mailed for there by the secretary. The "Declaration" was a refusal to deal with investigating committees and categorically stated: "We shall be ready to deal only if the resolutions of Beaver Dam and Watertown are rescinded, all cases are reopened as new cases, and Synod thereby shows a new attitude which might give hope of profitable dealings."²⁷ That statement has for over fifty years stood in the way of all efforts to bridge the division. Even a setting aside of resolutions proved futile.

²³ See Note 12.

²⁴ Claus Gieschen, "Ten Lively years," *Faith-Life*, January 1938, p. 5b.

²⁵ *F-L*, January 1938, pp. 7b-8a.

²⁶ *F-L*, January 1938, p. 8b.

²⁷ *Kiessling*, p. 24.

Another meeting of the Protes'tants should be mentioned to round off this section on *Faith-Life Fellowship Formed*. It is the Jan. 17, 1928, gathering at Wilton that resolved to begin publishing *Faith-Life* at Easter. This is another resolution with an impact of over fifty years.

V. Crises and Conflicts Continue

Soon more and more names were being added to the roll of Protes'tants. A pattern, a chain reaction, a domino effect began to assert itself. A friend and brother of a Protes'tant would be unwilling to break fellowship with him. This would put his synodical fellowship in question. Such "domino defections" began to occur as soon as a Protes'tant Conference was created and they are still occurring. Back in 1928 Professor E. E. Sauer of Northwestern preached for Pastor W. Hass of Oconomowoc and was soon deposed and suspended. Fifty some years later Pastor Christmann of Green Bay sides with Pastor Brand, a Protes'tant, and soon is suspended. In between the two instances are many others that may have their own unique factors but all follow the basic pattern.

By now the question is in place: What did the Synod itself do to settle the controversy? Actually up to this point in the story, 1928, it had not done all that much. As previously mentioned, the Synod set up committees to look into the Watertown problem. The committee reports were accepted. It was the same in the Fort Atkinson case. The 1925 Synod Convention consequently contributed little to the record.

By 1927 the Controversy had worsened and the Synod Convention of that year had been presented with numerous appeals and protests from the protesting side. It chose, however, to view the whole matter as a Western Wisconsin District problem that lay beyond its jurisdiction. The one step it took was to order that a committee agreeable to both the Western Wisconsin District and the protesters should be set up to attempt mediation.

The 1929 Synod Convention was much more involved with the Protes'tant Controversy than its immediate predecessors. The Koehler problem came to a head but discussion of this matter will be deferred to a subsequent section of the essay. The meeting resolved on the appointment of a "Peace Committee" that would function for four years. It worked hard but its reports to the 1931 and 1933 Synod Conventions were so controversial that in both instances the whole problem was once again referred back to the Western Wisconsin District. The Peace Committee was discharged in 1933. From that time on there is little to report on synodical dealings with the Protes'tant Controversy until a whole new generation was on the scene.

Of all the "Continuing Crises and Conflicts" none was more regrettable, more tragic than the Professor J. P. Koehler ouster at the Seminary. The subject is involved enough to make the basis for its own paper, as lengthy as this is. Only essential details can be supplied here.²⁸

The Controversy began, while Koehler was off in Europe tracing synodical roots to Barmen, Basel and Berlin. By the time he returned the Watertown affair had erupted and his son Karl was one of the two third party members. Koehler himself was requested to intervene in the Fort Atkinson case. He tried but could get nowhere with the two teachers.

Then came the Beitz paper. Koehler agreed that the Seminary faculty should provide an evaluation for the embattled Western Wisconsin District. He did not, however, provide his evaluation. He put his "John Hancock" at the top of the list of four signers. Subsequently he withdrew the signature when his proviso that there should be no *Gutachten* released until he had met face-to-face with Beitz was not honored. By the time he met with Beitz the *Gutachten* was printed and disseminated. The meeting was obviously unfruitful. A second meeting with Beitz, who was by then under suspension, would produce a line of thought that the Koehler developed first in a writing, *Ertrag*, and then later in the *Beleuchtung*, both of which were Koehler's own *Gutachten* of the Beitz paper that differed from the faculty *Gutachten*.

²⁸ Reluctantly the essayist refers to the writing cited in Note 2.

The faculty *Gutachten* took Beitz at his word, at his *Wortlaut*, and thus arrived at its denunciation of unclarity, false doctrine and judging. Koehler sought to find extenuating circumstances that would make a more charitable reading possible. The disagreement boiled down to a matter of interpretation principles.

This was serious. The persons involved were professionals in interpretation. They found it difficult to yield even an inch. Since the interpretation involved a paper that was acquiring the role of shibboleth in a divided and dividing church body, the difference loomed all the larger.

The issue came to a head in 1929. Just before the Synod met, Koehler released his *Beleuchtung* that spelled out his disagreement with the *Gutachten*. His two Seminary colleagues, Pieper and Meyer, replied promptly with their *Antwort*. The Seminary Board cast its lot with the *Antwort* and dismissed Koehler.

The synodical meeting, however, set up a new committee to help the old and new Seminary boards seek an agreement. Koehler was granted a temporary leave from classroom duties. No agreement could be reached. In September 1930 Koehler moved from his housing at what is now Section Nine to Nielsville where his son Karl lived. The 1933 Synodical Convention reviewed the report that Koehler's fellowship with Protes'tants had broken his fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod. One wishes one could close the subject on a better note.

VI. Minnesota Makes Its Move

What of the District you are most interested in? Already in 1924 Minnesota showed its concern by resolving regarding the Watertown affair: "We regret the trouble at the Institution and hope that the committee appointed will be able to settle matters to such an extent that such things may not occur again?"²⁹ While it was certainly concerned about the mounting troubles in the Synod in 1926, the Minnesota District had no reason to act officially in the matter.

The 1928 meeting is another story. Reacting to the resolutions of the committee on the President's Report the district deplored "the events causing the Western Wisconsin District the loss of several pastors, teachers and congregations" and then suggested, in what was certainly a rebuke of its sister District across the Mississippi, "Christ has given instruction for church discipline not for the purpose of condemnation but the salvation of souls."³⁰

Minnesota's concerns regarding the Protes'tant Controversy beyond its borders reached a high point in the 1930 District Convention. A ten-man Seminary Committee provided a long report, adopted by the District, that dealt in the main with the contested documents. Peace can only be restored, says the report, if the misunderstandings involved in the Beitz paper and the *Gutachten* are clarified.³¹

It was pointed out that there were conflicting interpretations of the Beitz paper. The author's unwillingness to offer clarification was deplored.

The opposition to Beitz was also faulted. The report questioned the wisdom of issuing a *Gutachten* in the first place and also of issuing it without face-to-face consultation with the writer being condemned. The District was seeking to bring the two camps closer together. That is the tone that sounds out loud and clear in the 1930 District Proceedings.

It is another story in 1932. When an approach to Beitz was made in the spirit of the 1930 resolutions a rebuff was encountered. A Beitz letter brushed off requests for clarification and suggested that Minnesota should be more diligent in its homework on the issue.³² The result is a brisque and businesslike report on the Protes'tant Controversy. Communications from the Western Wisconsin District and from Beitz are simply filed as matters "not within the judgment or control" of the District.³³

²⁹ *Minnesota District Proceedings*, 1924, p. 27.

³⁰ *Minnesota District Proceedings*, 1928, pp. 48-49.

³¹ *Minnesota District Proceeding*, 1930, pp. 32-25. This reference also covers the material in the next two paragraphs.

³² The Beitz letter is found in *F-L*, August 1930, pp. 6a-7b.

³³ *Minnesota District Proceedings*, 1932, pp. 72-73.

In 1936 the Minnesota District had to regard three of its pastors, H. Albrecht, E. Baumann and G. Scheutze “as people who have severed their affiliations with our Synod.” The reasons are predictable. There has been a practice of fellowship with Protes’tants and an unwillingness to continue dealings with District officials.³⁴

In review, the Minnesota District may have been somewhat below par as far as losses of pastors and congregations are concerned but it certainly was above par in reasoned and seasoned efforts at healing the break. One looks back at the months following the 1930 District Convention with a strong sense of the “It might have been.” It wasn’t and little happened for a long time.

VII. Belated Olive Branch

Finally in the late 1950s and early 1960s a major conciliatory effort was mounted. At the prompting of the Synod the Western Wisconsin District rescinded the suspension resolutions that had led to the formation of the Protes’tant Conference.³⁵ Lack of clarity and unanimity were given prominence as reasons for the rescission.

The rescission did not, however, bring about any peace between Protes’tants and Synod. It seemed to meet, at least in part, the demands of the Elroy Declaration. Why the failure? The Hintz suspension about the same time certainly put a damper on the whole effort. But the impression gained from numerous published reactions of Protes’tants to the rescission is that they regarded the step as “too little, too late.” Some called for instant fellowship as a reply to what had been conceived as a first step in that direction. Others wanted all anti-Protes’tant resolutions repudiated pronto.

In 1963 the Synod Convention had to face the fact of “disappointing results.” It still encouraged “the Western Wisconsin District and the other districts that are involved in the Protes’tant matter ... to seek steps to close this long-standing break.”³⁶

Twenty years and more have passed since then but the break remains. In recent years it has been enlarged by the Fremont-Green Bay developments. This turns the subject to:

VIII. Present Problems and Prospects

Regrettable and poignant and tragic as those developments at Fremont and Green Bay may be, the veteran observer’s first reaction will be that history is repeating itself. Earlier in this essay a line was drawn from Pastor Christmann to Professor Sauer. The line is simply intensified by what is being said at this point.

Certain pastors become involved in the Protes’tant Controversy. They may be in trouble with their congregations or they may be most able and appreciated in their ministry. They, however, cast their lot with the Protes’tants. Old issues are revived. Old fellowship problems arise. Old accusations are raised. Old established congregations are disturbed and divided. This is not said as disparagement. This is said as a statement of fact. Eventually one must face the question of doctrinal differences. Are there such that divide the Protes’tants and the Wisconsin Synod? The question is not easy to answer.

Way back in the late Twenties skilled interpreters were at loggerheads over the problem of doctrinal differences in the Beitz paper. One doubts whether the belated wisdom of the Eighties will really supply a definitive answer.

Held to strict *Wortlaut*, Beitz can be questioned on such matters as the role of the Law in repentance. Granted the benefit of the doubt, in the mode of Koehler and others, he could pass an orthodoxy test. In the final analysis, however, one should assert that in the matter of conference papers, and that is in the area of public doctrine, the key point is clarity and all unclarity should be clarified. When doctrine is at stake, the sponsoring of doubt or disbelief are equally to be avoided.

³⁴ *Minnesota District Proceedings*, 1936, pp. 13-14, 15, 73-74.

³⁵ *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings*, 1961, pp. 199-200.

³⁶ *Wisconsin Synod Proceeding*, 1963, p 222.

There is another reason why it is difficult to discuss doctrinal divergence in the Protes'tant Controversy. This is the prior demand of Protes'tants to clean the whole slate before substantial discussions can get started. Since the Twenties there may have been private discussions of doctrinal issues involved in the dispute between the Protes'tant Conference and the Synod. None such, however, appeared on the record. Discussions of this sort never really got beyond the introductory stage.

In the absence of direct doctrinal confrontation there is and should be a reluctance to throw the charge of false doctrine hither and yon. The historical record, however, plainly indicates that the Protes'tants and we do not see eye-to-eye in the matter of fellowship. If the opportunity presented itself, this essayist would very much like to discuss with Protes'tants the Bible teaching of obduracy. As late as a decade ago, a Protes'tant withdrew from the Conference over this issue.³⁷

In conclusion a "Protes'tant Profile" will be presented. The latest statistical report indicates that the Protes'tant Conference has eight pastors with ten congregations comprising 1600 members. There are only 165 enrolled in the 10 Sunday Schools. Least praiseworthy statistics are to be found in the "giving" columns. Among the nine Lutheran church bodies supplying financial statistics in 1982 the Protes'tant Conference ranked dead last in the "total contributions" column. Its figure was \$147, half of the \$289 of the Wisconsin Synod. In the work-at-large column the *Faith-Life* adherents again ranked dead last. Their average contribution was a little over \$11. The WELS figure was almost \$60. Remember, figures can lie!

If the essayist is forced into predicting the future, he will have to assume a Cassandra role of prophet of doom and gloom, at least in so far as the historical record is concerned. That is human judgment. What the Holy Spirit can do and will do is another matter.

Given the let-down of the early Sixties it is not easy to hope for a swift and surprising end to the Protes'tant Controversy. According to human judgment, one would have to predict a resurgence of Protes'tant difficulties in a dozen years or so. They could come sooner. They could come later.

This is, however, too pessimistic a note on which to round off a paper that has had to accentuate the negative. What would really be wrong with each and every one of us resolving today to do anything and everything possible to heal a break that has existed in Wisconsin Synod history for over a half century? What would be wrong with each and every one of us praying tonight and subsequent nights that the Holy Spirit might do what we have been unable to do?

This essayist's generation with its graying hair stands somewhere in the middle. It has inherited a Protes'tant Controversy from its fathers. It bequeaths that Controversy to another generation.

It appears that the Protes'tant Conference will continue to exist in the years ahead. It is well for all of us to have at least some acquaintance with the group and its history. It is the purpose of this paper to make a small contribution in that direction.

³⁷ *F-L*, May-June 1973, pp. 12-15.