

The Seminary's Continuing Concern for Truth and Unity

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[This is the last in this anniversary series of articles describing the seminary's purpose and role in the life of the church. The series was published in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, beginning in Winter 1988.]

The first and foremost demonstration of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary's concern for biblical truth and doctrinal unity is the day-to-day teaching in its classrooms. When the Scripture's subject matter for exegetical and historical and systematic and practical theology is faithfully and efficiently transmitted to one group of learners after the other, then truth will prevail and unity will be cherished. Then the seminary will be fulfilling its primary service to the Lord of the church and to the church body.

Such day-to-day teaching, however—important as it may be—is hardly the stuff for anniversary articles in theological periodicals. It is almost a given in a functioning seminary, receiving specific attention only during periodic institutional self-studies.

What will be given attention here is concern for truth and unity outside the classroom and beyond the hill. In its century and a quarter of history Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary has on numerous and often crucial occasions been able to provide such *ad extra* services. Sometimes a doctrine had to be defended from an attack by errorists or had to be clarified for those lacking full knowledge. Sometimes long and painstaking discussions had to be carried on with those joining the fellowship of the faith or with those in the process of disaffiliating.

I

The church body that in 1863 opened its worker-training school was “a house divided against itself.” The lax Lutheranism associated with the original founding was in the process of giving way to a more determined confessional stance. There were, however, still struggles to be undergone and viewpoints to be corrected. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was to play a part in the developments. In fact, the presidential report to the 1865 convention expressed that hope. Vice president Streissguth, speaking for the retiring G. Reim, put it this way:

The complaint heard often enough that we are not serious about the confession of our church was unjust, although we gladly admit our failing in this respect. Many a failing of this kind will be permanently rectified because the majority of our new workers will be trained at our own seminary. Thereby, as has already happened in other areas of America, the unanimity and unity of the synod will be significantly furthered!ⁱ

In that same 1865 synodical convention the first seminary professor and president, Eduard Moldehnke, in addition to a lengthy, five-page school report presented an essay which stretched over four sessions and concluded with a notable thesis that the convention adopted as its own resolution. The secretary has this wording:

The synod declares that, although recognizing the ability and occasional contributions of the new theologians, it does not regard the doctrine of our Lutheran church to be refuted by the new theology and that, on the contrary, it adheres firmly to the symbolical books of our Lutheran church, *because* they are in harmony with God's Word. At this point the body resumed the previous open discussion of the term *because* in the confession to the symbols *because* they are the correct interpretation of Holy Scripture. The discussion leads to the resolution that:

- 1) the *because* in the concluding thesis refers to the complete doctrinal content,
- 2) in this sense the concluding thesis has been accepted.ⁱⁱ

The Wisconsin Synod had committed itself to the Confessions by its constitutional requirements for ordination in 1850 and its rejection of the *Definite Platform* in 1856.ⁱⁱⁱ It was, however, as President Bading emphasized in his 1862 convention address, “one thing to have the right and truly pure doctrine on paper...and something different to possess it in one’s own clear understanding and one’s own childlike faith.”^{iv} Was Moldehnke’s essay and its concluding thesis that the convention adopted just another paper stand? They seem to have been more than that, another step in the right direction and that much closer to the goal.

A test case would soon present itself. In just two years the synodical convention debated its relation to the Union church and the sponsoring mission societies that were a part of that Union. By that time Professor Moldehnke had resigned his posts and returned to Germany. He was replaced as seminary president by Adolf Hoenecke, a schoolmate of Moldehnke at Halle University and an 1863 addition to the Wisconsin pastoral ranks. In 1867 Hoenecke chaired the convention committee deliberating the synodical position on the Union.^v

The chairman and the majority of the committee brought in a report that was loud and clear in its disavowal of the false fellowship between the Lutherans and the Reformed in the Union. Some key points in this majority report, according to the original numbering, are:

- 2) A definite testimony on this point [position on the Union] has previously not been made by the synod to those on the outside.
- 3) In our present circumstances it is not sufficient only to state positively that we are Lutherans; even more must the negative declaration be added that we reject the Union.
- 4) These are the reasons that demand this: a) truth and honesty since so many call themselves Lutherans and actually are not that; b) a recollection of the example of the fathers of our church; c) even the Reformed have testified against the Union which, however, actually works to their benefit; should that not put us to shame? d) the faithful Lutherans within the territorial church expressed themselves definitely against the Union; do we not have a sacred obligation to strengthen these brethren?
- 5) There are, however, two kinds of union: the one is wrought by God, the other is made by men.
- 6) The latter man-made union is either a doctrinal union or an organizational union—as has actually been perpetrated on the church by a misuse of the state’s power.
- 7) Through this latter man-made union, as is well known, crying evil has been done the Lutheran Church in that consciences were enslaved and the church was even robbed of its possessions.
- 8) Therefore not only such a manufactured doctrinal union but also such an enforced organizational union is to be definitely rejected.

In this doctrinal stand Professor Hoenecke was trying to lead the church body on a pathway it was willing to follow only with hesitation and trepidation. Actually, the convention rejected the majority report in favor of a one-man, perhaps two-man, minority report sponsored by Pastor Meumann. This minority report came down equally hard on a man-made doctrinal union but called for a toleration of a man-made organizational union and an acceptance of its financial support, so long as the gospel and sacraments could be retained in purity and protests against the evils of the Union continued to be mounted.

No matter what the synodical intention may have been, events forced a definite show-down. Even the minority report that the convention adopted was too offensive for the mission societies. If there would be no softening of the fellowship stand, they insisted, there would have to be an end to the supplying of missionaries and subsidies. The Wisconsin Synod was headed for the proverbial crossroads as it approached its 1868 convention.

At that convention another fellowship issue loomed large. Wisconsin had become a charter member of the newly formed General Council but soon was forced to some second thoughts. Already at the constituting

convention in the fall of 1867 the Council gave evidence of a wavering position on fellowship when it postponed definite action on the “Four Points” challenge, involving, among other things, pulpit and altar fellowship with the Reformed.

Professor Hoenecke knew the Council situation at first hand. He had been a delegate to the 1867 Council convention and served on its committee dealing with the “Four Points.” When the convention accepted the committee’s report recommending that the individual synods should first express themselves before any specific Council action be taken, Hoenecke promptly joined his fellow Wisconsin delegates, Acting President Bading and Professor Martin, and Pastor Welden of Pennsylvania in having their dissent recorded.^{vi}

At the 1868 Wisconsin convention Professor Hoenecke served on both committees dealing with the fellowship issue. He was chairman of the committee that considered relations with the Union societies and a member of the committee on General Council membership.^{vii} His committee stood firm on the Union issue, thanking the societies for past favors and accepting the rupture in relations.^{viii} After a lengthier discussion the convention actually strengthened the committee report on the General Council by adding the stipulation that a satisfactory “Four Point” stand must be taken at the next Council convention.^{ix} When that did not occur, Wisconsin automatically terminated its membership.

These fellowship decisions, in which Professor Hoenecke played such a key role, had far-reaching implications. Old associations were forsworn, but the way was paved for a new one. The Missouri Synod, persistent critic of real and imagined fellowship aberrations, noted what was happening. Soon Missouri-Wisconsin meetings were held in which the synods recognized one another as orthodox and projected joint efforts in worker training. Professor Hoenecke was one of the five Wisconsin representatives that met with Dr. C.F.W. Walther and four other Missouri men in that historic October 1868 meeting that heralded the founding of the Synodical Conference just four years later.

For many years the benchmark of the Synodical Conference’s doctrinal position was its fellowship stand. Wisconsin and Minnesota and Missouri men worked together in maintaining that stand against all attacks and at all costs. A high-water mark was reached at the Detroit 1904 free conference when clear testimony was given by Professor Hoenecke and like-minded men from St. Louis that the fellowship of faith does not only involve the pulpit and the altar but also prayer.^x

Eventually the united stand and testimony of the Synodical Conference broke down. In the 1930s the Missouri Synod began to embark on diverging pathways and her Synodical Conference sisters, Wisconsin and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod and sometimes the Slovak body, began a twenty-five year effort to maintain the Conference’s position.

The problems were multiple—doctrinal agreements, Scouting, military chaplaincy, cooperation in externals, joint prayer—but the basic issue was always the same: unionism, as the Wisconsin conventions of 1953 and 1955 insisted, or false fellowship, making common cause with those who did not share a common faith.^{xi} What the fathers had wrestled with almost a century before had to be dealt with by another generation.

In the prolonged debate, stretching from 1938 to 1961 and even beyond, the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary faculty was deeply involved. At the outset the smaller faculty with the Conference of Presidents served as the synodical Commission on Inter-Church Relations of that day, though under a different title. After a streamlining process and an effort to broaden representation on the committee the original arrangement gave way to an executive committee, on which several seminary professors served, and an advisory committee of which all faculty members were members.

The Wisconsin Synod has reason to be grateful for the service rendered all those years by seminary men, and of course others too, in combatting unionism and cherishing the true fellowship of the faith. The written record is black-on-white evidence of this faithful service. It is, however, but the tip of the whole massive effort.

Two seminary heads deserve special mention. President E. Reim served as executive officer and chief spokesman of the inter-church relations committee until 1957, when he felt that his church body was in error by not breaking relations with Missouri. His successor as seminary head and chief officer of the committee was Carl Lawrenz. To him fell the unenviable task of guiding the church body through the actual break with

Missouri and withdrawal from the Synodical Conference and the difficult problems these steps left in their wake.

It is to be hoped that the fellowship lessons learned and taught by the fathers will not be forgotten. The doctrine will continue to have its importance in the days and years ahead. It will serve to direct efforts to call into being a new “synodical conference” here and abroad. It will have to guide future discussions with those formerly in fellowship with us, both those in the Church of the Lutheran Confession, who severed relations with us because of our fellowship dealing with the Missouri Synod, and with those in the latter body that seems intent on operating with a “graded” system of fellowship requirements.^{xii}

II

At a time when regard for the doctrine of election is more honored in the breach than in the observance and when the truth is seldom used as a sermon theme or lesson topic, it is hard to imagine that for sixty years around the turn of this century that doctrine and its twin, conversion, absorbed the attention of midwestern Lutherans more than any other. But that is the way it was, also for the Wisconsin Synod and the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

The 1877 Walther district convention essay on election is usually thought of as the beginning of the election-conversion controversy in our land. Already in the early 1870s, however, there were skirmishes touched off by a footnote to a *Brobst Monatshefte* article by Gottfried Fritschel asserting that Luther changed his views on election. One such early battle is of interest because it involves Adolf Hoenecke, even if he was at the time not connected with the seminary while it sojourned at St. Louis.

Koehler tells the story as related to him by observers.^{xiii} At a Missouri pastoral conference in the Watertown area, Hoenecke, a visitor, became involved in an animated conversion debate with F. Stellhorn, then the Missouri professor at Northwestern. According to the account Hoenecke figuratively and literally cornered Stellhorn. Thirty years later the two would debate the same subject at the free conferences of those days.

The Wisconsin Synod was ready to take action regarding the election doctrine at its 1882 joint convention with Minnesota at La Crosse. By that time the Synodical Conference had split over the issue, with Ohio advocating the *intuitu fidei* approach and withdrawing from the Conference.

At the La Crosse convention the seminary, relocated on Wisconsin turf in 1878, provided strong doctrinal leadership. The convention essay, “Theses on Conversion,” was given by Professor August Graebner. His three theses read:

Conversion is the transfer of a person from the state of sin and wrath, in which by nature every person finds himself, into the state of faith and grace, in which man must necessarily be in order to be saved.

A person cannot contribute in the slightest degree to his conversion either by his activity or by his disposition. That some are converted and others remain in their lost condition is to be explained as little by a difference in people as by a denial of God’s universal will of grace.

Conversion is worked by God alone, who through his Word with always stronger, but not irresistible, effect, prepares and accomplishes conversion.^{xiv}

In the discussion of the second thesis and the cause of conversion Graebner centered attention on election. At this point Secretary Jaekel records: “Hereupon followed the coherent exposition of the doctrine of election by Professor Hoenecke, which is reproduced in what follows.”^{xv} In the page-long summary these points that Hoenecke made are listed: In his mercy God determined to redeem the lost world in Christ; all are included in this gracious determination; God also elected those who are saved and on that account converts and preserves them; Scripture teaches both a universal will of grace and an election of those saved; the call to conversion is always efficacious whether the sinner rejects it or whether conversion is effected. After a similar presentation by a Minnesota spokesman both synods declared themselves for an election because of God’s mercy and

Christ's merits and against one *intuitu fidei*. The declaration was nearly unanimous.^{xvi} The Bible truth prevailed through the clear and consistent testimony of Hoenecke, Graebner and others.

In another stage of the election controversy in another century, the five free conferences from 1903 to 1906, the Wauwatosa men at the seminary's new location played significant roles. Adolf Hoenecke was still very much involved. He chaired the agenda committee that prepared for the third conference at Detroit and tried to bring about a fruitful discussion of the "analogy of faith" issue that surfaced at the previous Milwaukee conference. Professor Koehler wrote his lengthy article on the subject stretching through the first volume of the *Quartalschrift*. Over against those who were trying to harmonize the deep truths of conversion and election with a so-called "totality of Scripture," Koehler insisted that the analogy is simply the sum total of the truths Scripture presents in specific passages about specific doctrines. In the Fort Wayne conferences on election in 1905 and on conversion in 1906, Koehler and Hoenecke were the main Wisconsin speakers.

At Detroit in 1904 another new seminary professor, August Pieper, so stressed the need for making the starting point of the discussions the Scriptures that some drew the conclusion that he and his colleagues were unconcerned about the Lutheran Confessions.^{xvii} At Fort Wayne, Hoenecke and Koehler repeatedly stressed this need to let the Scriptures in Ephesians 1:4 and other election passages speak for themselves.^{xviii}

Actually, a very special emphasis on a historical-grammatical approach to Scripture was beginning to assert itself, also beyond the confines of the church body. It would become known as the "Wauwatosa theology" or the "Wauwatosa gospel."

A third round in the election controversy began at the time of the Reformation quadricentennial. Local discussions, such as those at Minnesota's Sibley County, blossomed into what became known as the "Intersynodical Conferences" or "Chicago Conferences." Ohio, Iowa, Buffalo somewhat belatedly, Missouri and Wisconsin delegated representatives to discuss conversion and election first and then all other disputed doctrines. The resultant "Chicago Theses" came to grief when Missouri rejected them in 1929. For a time, however, it appeared that an *intuitu fidei* election would be rejected by all.^{xix} Koehler, who was one of the seminary representatives in these discussions along with John Schaller and Herman and John Meyer, makes this encouraging remark about the endeavor in an article noting the fiftieth anniversary of the Synodical Conference in 1922:

The present confused condition of the world will place us before an assignment about whose immensity we cannot now derive an adequate conception. But God has also endowed us through the settlement of the election controversy achieved up to this point with powers that were not available at the close of the Thirty Years' War. Only if we recognize this talent, will we be truly thankful to God.^{xx}

How much of a contribution the seminary men made to an enlarged recognition of grace can of course not be known. What is apparent from the record, however, is that they gave this cause their best effort. It is not their fault if we are failing in our recognition and use of the talent.

While the election controversy was in its second stage in the first years of the century, a somewhat related controversy over objective justification erupted. Those who would not hear of any election not *intuitu fidei* also renewed insistence that there could be no justification without faith and consequently no objective justification.

This development prompted August Pieper to write for the third volume of the *Quartalschrift* his unforgettable article, *Ohio's neuer Angriff auf die Lehre von der Rechtfertigung*. Its conclusion was quoted by another seminary professor in another generation and by a third a generation later.^{xxi} The conclusion reads:

One cannot oppose any doctrine of God's Word with impunity; this increases sin and guilt, damages consciences and blinds the heart. One error begets another, as in the election controversy the insistence on *intuitu fidei* soon brought with itself the synergistic doctrine of conversion. But whoever molests the doctrine of justification stabs the gospel in the heart and is

on the way of losing entirely Christian doctrine and personal faith and of falling into the arms of heathenism, even if he ever so much emphasizes justification by faith.

III

A special place in this writing on doctrinal and unity concerns at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary must be reserved for the church-ministry matter. If there is one special doctrine that stands out in the synodical history, it is the position on church and ministry. Overseas Lutherans have even referred to this as the *Sonderlehre* of the Wisconsin Synod. And if there is one unique and single-handed doctrinal contribution to the church body by its seminary, it is the clarification of its position on church and ministry. The whole subject is so well known that a very brief treatment can suffice.

Here in this land immigrant church bodies had to develop new polity theories and organizational forms. Naturally all sorts of questions suggested themselves. Some Lutherans wanted to vest church authority in a strong leader, some in a clergy caste, some in the laity. Some advocated power by a ministerium, some by a synod, some by local congregations. The list of church-ministry viewpoints is almost endless.

In Wisconsin circles the emphasis was not much on polity forms, but rather on more basic questions about the true nature of the church and of the ministry. The synod began as a ministerium and was so indicated by its first name. But it was soon operating as a synod of clergy and laity. Larger questions surfaced when the place of the teachers of the parochial schools had to be ascertained.

The usually accepted view of church and ministry was one that stressed the authority of the local congregation and viewed the pastorate of that congregation as the prime form of ministry. After reaching agreement with Missouri and joining the Synodical Conference, the Wisconsin Synod quite generally espoused this position.

A rethinking was called for at the turn of the century because of what is known as the “Cincinnati Case.”^{xxii} At Cincinnati, in brief, a Missouri congregation excommunicated a member in a school dispute. He appealed his case and eventually district and synod sided with him and against the congregation and its pastors and teachers. These did not accept the ruling, left their district and synod, and applied for membership in the Wisconsin Synod. This application forced the question: When synodical and congregational discipline clash, what prevails?

The Wauwatosa seminary professors, Koehler, Pieper and Schaller, who replaced Hoenecke in those years, sought the answer by searching their New Testaments. Setting aside all preconceptions, they simply looked for guidance in the Scriptures. What they found was little about special one-of-a-kind forms of church and ministry but much about believers grouping themselves together and much about the ministry of the gospel.

The result was the emphasis that God wants believers to gather but has not specified the form of the gathering and that God has instituted the ministry but has not specified just exactly what form the ministry should take. The Wauwatosa theology was at work. Koehler provided the exegetical groundwork, and Pieper did most of the early writing in the newly founded *Quartalschrift*.^{xxiii}

It was no easy task the Wauwatosa men set themselves. The old viewpoints died hard. In some instances they never died. It took many discussions, many conference papers and debates, many articles, but eventually the Wauwatosa men gained their point in their church body.

It was another matter in the Synodical Conference. The Missouri Synod was loath to relinquish its position that the local congregation is the one divinely instituted form of the church and that the pastor of the local congregation is the one divinely instituted form of the ministry. The dispute culminated in a meeting in 1932 at what is now Mequon but was then Thiensville. Missouri men met with their Wisconsin counterparts, and the result was the “Thiensville Theses.”^{xxiv}

An agreement of sorts was worked out but only by substituting for the key term, “divinely instituted,” the less demanding wording, “God’s will and order.” This is not to raise the charge of doctrinal compromise. Neither Missouri nor Wisconsin wanted any of that. What was done at Thiensville was no doubt a setting down

of the largest possible agreement with the intention of working from there to the unresolved issues at subsequent meetings.

Unfortunately no such additional meetings were held at that time when the Depression kept meetings to a minimum and when Missouri began to embark on meetings with others. In any event, the disagreement between Missouri and Wisconsin endured into the larger conflict that brought about the break in relations. By that time, however, Wisconsin's church-ministry position was no longer one espoused only by a very few seminary professors but had become a cherished synodical heritage.

The final word of the preceding paragraph prompts a concluding paragraph to an article that could go on and on in recalling instances of seminary concerns for truth and unity. "Heritage" sums up the whole matter. The Wisconsin Synod and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary can say of the seminary teachers of old, "I have a goodly heritage." Heritages are the stuff that makes anniversaries, but they must also be relived in the synod and at the seminary if they are to be of real and lasting value.

Endnotes

ⁱ *Wisconsin Proceedings*, 1865, p 5. Hereafter *WP*.

ⁱⁱ *WP*, 1865, p 20. Strangely enough the essay is not given a title in the minutes, but the general content can be surmised from the citation. On two occasions the convention resolved unsuccessfully that the essay be completed in the next session, p 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ *WP*, 1850—Constitution, Sec. VI, 9, and 1856, p 3.

^{iv} *WP*, 1862, p 6.

^v *WP*, 1867, p 11. Other committee members were Pastors G. Thiele, H. Quehl, Th. Meumann and A. Kleinert and the delegates, J. Buntrock of Eldorado, C. Kiekhefer of St. John, Milwaukee, and C. Loehrke of Theresa. The committee reports, both majority and minority, and the floor discussion are recorded on pp 22–23 of the minutes.

^{vi} *General Council Proceedings*, 1867, p 19.

^{vii} *WP*, 1868, p 13.

^{viii} *WP*, 1868, p 26.

^{ix} *WP*, 1868, pp 19,27,31.

^x The most thorough description of the Detroit and the other free conferences is supplied by Dr. Nicum's reports in *Der Lutherische Herold*. Dr. G. Bente in a *Lehre und Wehre* article (March 1905) espouses, if he does not name, a "unit concept" of fellowship. The article is titled, "Warum koennen wir keine gemeinsamen Gebetsgottesdienste mit Ohioern und Iowaern veranstalten und abhalten?"

^{xi} *WP*, 1953, pp 102–106 and 1955, pp 85–88.

^{xii} As an example see Samuel H. Nafzger's "The LC-MS and Joint Worship Services" in *Lutheran Witness* CIII (June 1983), p 208. The approach is receiving increased attention at the present time.

^{xiii} J.P. Koehler, *History of the Wisconsin Synod* (St. Cloud, MN, 1970), pp 157–158.

^{xiv} *WP*, 1882, p 13.

^{xv} *WP*, 1882, p 33.

^{xvi} In the Wisconsin ranks those opposed were Pastor Althoff, Pastor Klindworth, recently come to Wisconsin from Iowa, his Galena delegate and Teacher Gruber of Oshkosh. Pastor Kleinlein abstained. The two negative votes in Minnesota were Pastors Seigrist and Vollmar. On p 79 of the minutes is the notation that at Professor Hoenecke's insistence there were further convention discussions with Pastor Klindworth with the result that he declared his withdrawal from the synod.

^{xvii} See the Iowa description of the Detroit conference by Max Fritschel in *Kirchliche Zeitschrift*, XXVIII, 4, pp 177–188.

^{xviii} The early *Quartalschrift* volumes, especially II, 4 and IV, 1–2, carry running accounts of the Fort Wayne debates.

^{xix} Eventually the election section of the "Chicago Theses" carried a footnote in which Iowa and Ohio representatives, while personally disavowing *intuitu fidei*, declared they would tolerate the approach in others. This was a strong factor in the 1929 rejection by Missouri.

^{xx} J.P. Koehler, *Die Synodalkonferenz in der Geschichte der arnerikanisch-lutherischen Kirche*. *WLQ*, XIX (July 1922), pp 180–181.

^{xxi} *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, XXXVII (April 1940), p 122, and *Wisconsin Proceedings*, 1975, p 172. Pieper's article is in *Quartalschrift*, III (April 1906), pp 65–120.

^{xxii} J.P. Koehler, very much involved personally, tells the story vividly in his *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, pp 233–235.

^{xxiii} The chief *Quarterly* articles with volume number supplied are: *Menschenherrschaft in der Kirche* (VIII), *Die Suspension noch einmal* (VIII), a review of Walther's *Die Lehre von der Kirche und ihren Kennzeichen in Anwendung auf die Synode* (IX) and *Abschluss der Diskussion ueber die Lehre von der Kirche* (X).

^{xxiv} Koehler's *History of the Wisconsin Synod* has the Thiensville Theses on p 239.