

Some Reflections on the 125th Anniversary of The Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod

by James P. Schaefer

[A paper read at the Metro-North Pastoral Conference on May 19, 1975]

It was some months ago that a member of the conference program committee asked me to address you today on some aspect or other of the 125th anniversary of the Synod, the exact subject matter was appealingly vague. I lightly—too lightly, it appears now—accepted the assignment. It did not occur to me at the time that when May 19 appeared I would have the 125th anniversary coming out of my ears. For almost two years it consumed a substantial portion of my time, first the thank-offering, all \$3.5 million of it, and then the materials for the actual celebration. And in between time articles and addresses. When I accepted the assignment, second thought should have warned me that by May 19 you would be viewing the remains of a burned out case of anniversary fever.

As I toiled at the 125th anniversary over the past two years, I repeatedly turned to John P. Koehler's *History of the Wisconsin Synod*. My study of it has been informative and edifying, always reminding me that one of the greatest historians in the Lutheran Church in America to the present day was our Professor Koehler. The new one-volume edition is a worthy addition to every pastor's library.

In spite of Koehler's brilliant work, however, the definitive history of the Wisconsin Synod has still not been written. His *History* has a glaring deficiency. This deficiency was alluded to recently in an article on Bading's presidency in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* by Professor E. C. Fredrich.

Of Bading's presidency Fredrich writes: "In our historical evaluation (of Bading) we have generally tended to admit that Bading was on the scene at a crucial time in our Synod's history but then to assume that what developed was, if not exactly in spite of him, not to any appreciable extent because of him." (*WLQ*, April, 1975, p. 111)

Fredrich hypothesizes why this is so. "Synod and district presidents," he writes; "are not hero figures in our midst." I think Fredrich stresses overly much the part the Protestant controversy played in forming this judgment in the Synodical mind—though it is admitted here that the controversy did little to improve the judgment. But that is a small point, and I do not wish to quibble with Fredrich.

Fredrich cites a second reason: Koehler's bias. "One needs only a nodding acquaintance with Koehler's writings," explains Fredrich, "to realize that he ardently follows, or rather fosters, this Synodical viewpoint and consistently ranks the presidential office below the classroom of the worker-training school in importance and value for the church body." (*Ibid.*). No history of the Synod has been written in the last 30 years which does not lean heavily, if not exclusively, on Koehler's *History*. So we of the fourth and fifth generation read our history, at least up till 1930, with the Koehler bias. Not bad at all! But not all good!

We have throughout our history placed great stress on our worker-training schools, and who was teaching at them, and when. This perception is just and good. When the time comes that it is not so, we will be the worse for it. But there is a real world out there—outside the classroom, I mean. It is a real world where people set priorities, establish goals, make decisions, live, suffer, die. It is the world where things get done with Yankee efficiency, a universal attribute which the adjective appears to deny. Where character, where faith, where integrity, where vision assert themselves in action. We cannot write our history as though teachers were the pivot of that kind of world. One does not write the history of the Revolutionary War period by writing the history of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton.

Among the gifts of God which St. Paul counts in Romans 12, is the gift of "ruling", *προϊστῆμι* in the Greek text. In commenting on this catalogue of gifts, Dr. Martin Franzmann writes:

We (the church) constitute one organism that must function as one. Each member is solitary; no member is expendable. Thus individualism is overcome, and yet there is no deadly uniformity.

We have gifts that differ, and that differentiation is the gift of God's enriching grace to each of us. The gifts are God's grace, and they are there for us to use, not to evaluate and discuss. For grace is self-denying and self-imparting, as the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord has made us know. (Romans, Concordia Commentary, p. 221)

If we are to appreciate in its fullest dimensions the history of the Wisconsin Synod, we must recognize that God has graced the Wisconsin Synod not only with His gifts in our classrooms, but also with His gifts in our administration. Professor Fredrich has undertaken this vital work of revision in his *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* article. It must be the hope of all of us that he continues the revision. Without it, we shall never have a definitive history.

It is a serious error to underestimate the power and influence of the presidency. It is just as serious as overstating its power and influence. Aside from a militant minority, a substantial majority (in our Synod, or any other synod) listens, heeds, and follows its president. The president represents a consensus of the spirit and purpose that welds a corporate body together. If he doesn't, he isn't around long. He is the executive officer of that consensus and its chief spokesman.

The direct or indirect power of appointment, for example, is a significant element of his power and influence. During the 1971-'73 biennium the president, directly or indirectly, made about 70 appointments (subject, of course, to the ratification of the convention). Even in our very democratic body we ought never understate the power of the president to lead, direct, guide, and counsel. The president—and only the president—“shall officially represent the Synod and shall promote the interest of the Synod in every direction.” (Bylaws, 1.01(a)). All this power is inherent in the office of the president without regard to who occupies the office. It is hardly an “imperial presidency”, but just a glance in the direction of the Missouri Synod suggests this power and influence can be wielded widely and effectively and with the approval of the majority.

I would like to suggest that as we have been blessed in our 125 years with men of deep theological perception, they have been matched by “rulers” of comparable perception. For example, let's take Muehlhaeuser. Who in 1850 needed another Missouri Synod? If Muehlhaeuser had been of the “old style” Lutherans, there would have been no need for a Wisconsin Synod. Muehlhaeuser gave to the Wisconsin Synod warmth, a passion for souls, for the work of the parish ministry. Consciously or unconsciously Muehlhaeuser's leaven has been at work among us for 125 years. The presidency of Muehlhaeuser God used for His own blessed end.

Approaching nearer our time, there is the presidency of Pastor John Brenner. At a crucial point in our history God gave us the use of the great gifts of President Brenner. First of all, the Protestant controversy had polarized the Synod. In 1930 the president of the Seminary, Professor Koehler, had been “removed from office.” President Brenner's calm and even hand stilled the troubled waters.

Secondly, he presided over the Wisconsin Synod as Missouri began her slide from her high water mark of orthodoxy (the *Brief Statement*, 1932). It was Brenner's unique contribution to our history that he kept us from being dragged along. Although he was an able administrator, he possessed an unswerving devotion to truth. I don't know who coined the phrase among us that the 1938 resolutions of the Missouri Synod (on ALC fellowship) were a “denial of the truth.” But it has the Brenner ring to it. He could not abide equivocation or evasion. But if Koehler had written of that period in our history, Brenner would have wound up as the period at the end of Professor Reim's sentence!

Finally, President Brenner shaped the fiscal policies which are still with us today. When he was elected president in 1933, the Synod was deeply in debt, and the depression full upon us. Could the Synod remain solvent? was not a trivial question asked at that time. Under his leadership, the Synod pulled itself out of debt and adopted the “balanced budget” policy (don't-borrow-to-pay-the-coal-bill-principle), still the prevailing philosophy.

When President Brenner declined to run in 1953, he bequeathed to his successor an even more trying task. The controversy with Missouri was beginning to rage at gale force. The first official act of the new president was to preside at a special convention in October of that year to deal with the matter. The foundations

of Wisconsin were shaking. I am utterly unable to comprehend how the administration, in the eye of that hurricane was able to keep its bearings. We were shaken again when the resignation of the president of our Seminary a few years later was the lead article on the front page of the Milwaukee Journal. All of God's grace must have been raining on the Synod in those days. What did we need in the presidency? Whatever it was, we got it. Let me explain that.

Koehler closes his *History* with a benediction over the Synod he loved so dearly. In spite of the distress of his last 20 years, his final words in the History were for the Synod. He wrote:

May God, through His Holy Spirit, preserve the Synod and all who with her call upon the name of the Lord, in that soberness—of which even the old Greeks in their human wisdom knew enough to say: ‘nothing beyond measure!’—which Paul here in Romans 12:3 wants applied to the divine gift, and of which he makes application throughout the whole chapter for all the children of God, in all their doing, for all time! (p. 255)

From bitter experience he knew the greatness of the divine gift of *σωφροσύνη*, and why it was placed in chapter 12 of Romans in which St. Paul speaks of the gifts to the church. *Σωφροσύνη* and its cognates with good reason occur most frequently in the pastoral epistles: reasonableness, moderation, prudence, self-control, and self-discipline. In a postscript to his closing benediction, Koehler conflates Romans 12 and Ephesians 1 and submits it as a warning to his Synod: “Don’t think more highly of yourself than is proper, but think of yourself so it be wise thinking, feeling, willing, and being, according as God has dealt to every man the measure of faith, to the glory of His grace wherein He has made us acceptable in the Beloved.”

That divine *σωφροσύνη* is a noteworthy duality of the present administration, God's particular gift of His grace to us for a particular time. First as part time president and from 1959 as full time president, President Naumann adorned his office with that *σωφροσύνη* for which Koehler besought God. The extremes are always easy (though not always pleasant) to embrace. It takes little thought (I don't say intelligence) to be an extremist on either, end of the spectrum. The difficult path is the way of divine *σωφροσύνη*. Living the Gospel way is never an easy task. All the charges hurled at Jesus as he broke out of the prison of Pharasaic legalism are renewed. Luther was to experience that. And yet for not one moment to let go of truth—God's Truth—or compromise it. That is the difficult way.

I don't really care how many will agree with me. My historical sense, such as it is, tells me that *that* rather precisely characterizes our present administration. That it also characterizes our theological leader at this time takes nothing away from the leadership style of our present administration. We can thank God, thank Him heartily, for both men without diminishing one or the other.

It seems to me that only that kind of *σωφροσύνη* could keep the Synod together as it passed through the 1961 firestorm. All this is said in retrospect, but I think most of us felt it even then, if we did not always perceive it. The 1961 convention was the scene of a bitter battle—I don't think the words are careless rhetoric. Feeling ran high. But *σωφροσύνη* was in control, and after the historic decision was made we united to the task God was placing before us.

But every administration has another side: the organization, the structure, the program. Since 1961 we have entered a period of unprecedented expansion. Just a few figures. In fiscal 1961, the last fiscal year before the suspension of fellowship with the Missouri Synod, our budget was a mite over \$3 million. For the next fiscal year, 1975-'76, the budget calls for expenditures of \$7.7 million. Since 1961 the enrollment at our schools has almost doubled. The campuses of Dr. Martin Luther College and Northwestern College have been almost re-built. In 1961 we had organized congregations in 16 states. Today we have organized congregations in 44 states. We have effectively broken out of our Midwest ghetto. In 1961 we had mission fields in Zambia (Northern Rhodesia), Japan, Germany, and among the Arizona Apaches. Today, they reach out to these countries plus Malawi, Taiwan, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Colombia, and Puerto Rico. An urgent

call from the Cameroon awaits convention action. I cite these facts only as examples of the Wisconsin Synod explosion that went on since 1961.

In his recent book, *Confessions of a Conservative Evangelical*, Jack Rogers takes a look at the word *conservative*. He says that it's a good word, "it marks continuity with the past, preservation of enduring values, holding on to what have been proven with time." There is another sense, he says, in which the word *conservative* is used "tending to favor preservation of the existing order and to regard proposals for change with *distrust*." (Westminster Press, 1974, p. 11).

It is in the first sense that the present administration is conservative. But it is remarkably untainted by the desire to preserve the existing order just for the sake of preserving it. Through changes in program and structure that boggle the mind, the president has maintained the same posture: there is nothing sacred about the way we did things in the past; if change will serve the Kingdom's purpose in the future, let's go! That enlightened leadership has presided over changes which would send a John Bircher into cardiac arrest.

These changes could be effected because—here is the final word, I promise—the administration possessed that one ingredient without which no progress is possible: *TRUST*. The president trusted people. He did not fancy himself as the Sir Galahad for the past, defending its "honor", sword in hand fending off the rapists and destructive forces which tomorrow—if not today—would bring ruin upon our heads .

In holding this trust, his premise was simple: we are all servants of Jesus Christ. Because I happen to differ with you does not make you less a servant of our Lord. We all have one purpose: to bring the love and forgiveness of God in Christ to this world. Our confessional band is not a mixture of "good guys" and "bad guys"—all of us live too much from the mercy of God to think that. There are no "traitors" unless first they expose themselves. New proposals are not subversive attempts to torpedo the Wisconsin Synod ark. That trust, I say, was the vital ingredient in the administration which made the last fifteen years possible.

Permit me a personal note, irrelevant to my topic. In that same spirit of trust the day to day affairs are run in the Synod Administration Building. There is no fear in that office. No one is suspected. No one is under a cloud. Each one is treated as a mature, dedicated servant of our Lord Jesus Christ under obedience to His Word, as concerned about the Mission of the Church as our president is. You would be surprised to know how much that spirit can permeate the "managers" of the Synod, the 50 or so men who between seven-day conventions must administer the affairs of a complex organization under the direction of a responsible board over the intervening 723 days. And you would also be happy to discover how exhilarating it is to be treated as an upright man of God, rather than a wayward adolescent!

I committed one indiscretion. I know it. I began by suggesting that Koehler's brilliant *History* needs some corrective research. That research has started. It should continue. But here I end up talking about a current administration as though I were a historian a generation hence. But if this gross indiscretion sharpens our awareness of another area of grace, "the gift of ruling," which has also been a manifestation of that Grace of God over 125 years I shall have achieved my purpose.

Such are my reflections on the 125th anniversary of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod.