

The Theological Development Of The WELS With Particular Reference To Its Doctrine Of The Ministry

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The Origin of the Wisconsin Synod

In the 19th century the state of Wisconsin was a favorite goal of German immigrants. Lying on the shores of the Great Lakes in the northern part of the USA, this area enjoys a relatively favorable climate. In the 40s and 50s of the 19th century, Germans (especially from northern Germany) came in droves to Wisconsin.¹ To this day Wisconsin is the state in the United States with the largest number of German-Americans.

Like Friedrich Wyneken's call for help,² so also appeals for help came to Germany from this region to assure the spiritual care of the immigrants. In 1846 the Barmen Mission Society and the Langenberg Society (= the Evangelical Society for North America) sent the first "messengers" (Wrede, Weinmann) to New York. There they met Pastor Johannes Muehlhaeuser and went further with him to Wisconsin. Muehlhaeuser (1803-68) had been sent out by the Basel Christian Society and had been active as a pastor in Rochester, New York since 1838.

These pastors served scattered Lutherans in Wisconsin, who did not want to join the Missouri Synod, which was founded in 1847, nor the Buffalo Synod, founded 1845 by Prussian Old Lutherans. These two immigrant synods came into sharp conflict concerning the doctrines of church and ministry after Johann Grabau's *Hirtenbrief (Shepherd's Letter)* appeared in 1840. Grabau charged that the Missourians' congregational constitutions were influenced by American democracy. He advocated, among other things, the Romanizing view that the ministry of the keys belongs only to pastors³ and that the ministry can be handed on only by those who are in the ministry.⁴

Muehlhaeuser and his colleagues came from union churches or societies. They considered themselves to be Lutheran pastors, but as a result of their pietistic-revivalistic bent they had no understanding whatsoever of such doctrinal controversies. They gathered the scattered immigrants into congregations. On August 12, 1849, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, they established the German Ev. Lutheran Synod⁵ of Wisconsin. At its first convention in Granville (five miles northwest of Milwaukee) five pastors and 18 congregations were represented.⁶ Muehlhaeuser was elected president.

¹ Johannes Koehler, *Geschichte der Allg. Ev.Luth. Synode von Wisconsin*, Milwaukee, 1925, p. 181.

² Friedrich Wyneken's appeal in the Erlangen *Zeitschrift für Protestantismus und Kirche* (February 1843) led to the sending out of the Löhe messengers and was thereby instrumental in preparing the way for the founding of the Missouri Synod.

³ Contrary to the *Treatise* (added to the *Sm. Art.*), §24.

⁴ Demonstrated by citations in T. Johannes Grosze, *Unterscheidungslehren der hauptsächlich sich lutherisch nennenden Synoden sowie der namhaftesten Sektenkirchen in den Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika*, St. Louis, 1889, p. 111. Details in H. G. Löber, *Der Hirtenbrief des Herrn Pastor Grabau zu Buffalo vom Jahre 1840*, New York, 1849.

⁵ Originally: *Ministerium* (Koehler, op. cit., p. 40, Tr.)

⁶ Koehler, op. cit., p. 188. The following pastors: Muehlhaeuser, Weinmann, William Wrede, Kaspar Pluesz, and Paul Meisz. Cf. Elmer C. Kiessling, *Our Church: Its Life and Mission*, Milwaukee, 1990, p. 29.

It is striking that the first Wisconsin synodical constitution has no confessional paragraph. They considered themselves to be simply "an association of Evangelical Lutheran congregations." The Missourians' push for a clear confessional commitment was regarded in Wisconsin as excessive, yes, legalistic.⁷

Muehlhaeuser must have been an impressive, patriarchal type of person. He is praised for his deep piety and a great willingness to make sacrifices in serving the congregations. But as a pietistic Lutheran he treated church boundaries very casually. So in the beginning the new synod engaged in joint work with the General Synod, a union of conservative evangelical synods without a confessional commitment.

The Shift toward a Lutheran Confession

In 1860 the synod elected a new president: Pastor Johannes Bading, pastor of St. Mark congregation in Watertown. In the meantime mostly younger pastors were active in the congregations.⁸ Familiar names like, for example, Hoenecke, Sauer, Koehler, Reim appear for the first time. President Bading initiated a change of direction in the synod, which finally led it to confessional Lutheranism and closer to the Missouri Synod. Bading came from Berlin, where he was converted by Johannes Evangelista Goszner (1773-1858). In 1849 he went to the newly founded mission seminary at Hermannsburg. But he had a falling out with Louis Harms. So Bading allowed himself to be sent out by the Langenberger Society and arrived in Wisconsin in 1853. There he took over a congregation of the Wisconsin Synod. But already at his installation a controversy with President Muehlhaeuser arose. Bading wanted to be ordained on the basis of the Lutheran Confessions. Muehlhaeuser considered that to be extreme and called the Confessions "a paper wall." But he finally ordained the young pastor "in accord with his wishes."

As president, Bading initiated the practice that at synodical conventions doctrinal essays were regularly presented. As early as 1859 he proposed establishing a seminary for the training of future pastors. This was then resolved upon in 1862. In the fall of 1863 the establishment of the school in Watertown followed, with two enrolled as the first students. Dr. Eduard Moldehnke from New York was obtained as instructor. But the highly qualified German university theologian was ill-suited for the necessary practical work. So in 1866 he left the service of the Wisconsin Synod. Pastor Adolf Hoenecke (1835-1908) was called as instructor in his place. He served the seminary from 1866-70 and 1878-1908 as instructor and president.⁹ He has become known above all for his voluminous *Dogmatik*, which was published in parts by his sons after his death.

In the following years the synod occupied itself fully with doctrinal questions. In 1867, for example, the Open Question Theory of the Iowa Synod was studied with the result that Missouri's criticism of it was considered proper and scriptural. In 1868 a colloquy was held between the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods. It was established that there was agreement in doctrine.¹⁰ The Wisconsin Synod agreed now also to follow through on the practical consequences of its doctrinal position. So the ties to the united mission societies in Langenberg, Barmen, and Berlin were broken off and the joint work with the General Council was ended. In 1869 church fellowship was established with the Missouri Synod. A year later the Wisconsin Synod decided to have its theological students trained henceforth at Missouri's seminaries. The synod's own seminary in Watertown was closed. Prof A. Hoenecke declined a call to St. Louis on grounds of health.

When the "Ev. Luth. Synodical Conference" was organized in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on July 16, 1872, the Wisconsin Synod was a charter member. In addition to the Wisconsin Synod, this federation of confessionally faithful Lutheran synods in North America included the Missouri Synod, the Ohio Synod, the

⁷ Koehler, 22. op. cit., pp. 251, 294.

⁸ Those who were present at the establishment of the synod had for the most part left the synod. Weinmann died in 1858 in a catastrophe at sea. Wrede returned at the same time to Germany. (His son of the same name gained distinction later as a New Testament scholar of the History of Religion school.) Pluesz joined a Reformed synod. Meisz was removed from office.

⁹ Regarding A. Hoenecke, see August Pieper, "Dr. Hoeneckes Bedeutung für die Wisconsin Synod" in *Theologische Quartalschrift*, 1935, No. 3—1936, No. 2. English translation, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 1990-91.

¹⁰ Cf. C. F. W. Walther, *Briefe*, St. Louis, 1916, Vol. 2, pp. 134, 161.

Norwegian Synod, the Illinois Synod, and the Minnesota Synod.¹¹ Since the establishment of the Synodical Conference (1872) the congregations of our church [the ELFC] have also been in church fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod.

Independence and Growth

From the beginning the Missouri Synod, as the largest church in the Synodical Conference, had a certain predominance. The smaller synods struggled against attempts to absorb them. In 1876, for example, the proposal to merge all member churches was decisively rejected above all by the Wisconsin Synod.¹² In 1878 the Wisconsin Synod resolved to reopen its seminary in Milwaukee. A. Hoenecke was again called as president.

About 1880 the so-called Election Controversy shook the Synodical Conference. The Missourians under the leadership of C. F. W. Walther saw themselves as obligated to oppose the election doctrine of most of the orthodox Lutheran fathers. Their doctrine of *intuitu fidei* (election in view of future faith) was contrary to Scripture and led to synergism in conversion.¹³ The Ohio Synod and the large Norwegian Synod thereupon withdrew from the Synodical Conference. The Wisconsin Synod examined the Missouri doctrinal positions thoroughly and in 1882 came to recognize that these were in agreement with Scripture and the Confessions. It did not hesitate, however, to criticize individual expressions coming out of the Missouri Synod.¹⁴

In 1892 the Wisconsin Synod (with 90,000 members) decided to intensify joint work with the Minnesota Synod (22,000) and the Michigan Synod (12,000). A joint "General Synod" was established. This development led in 1918 to a merger of these three synods into the "Ev. Luth. Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States" (the present day "Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," WELS).¹⁵ About 1930 English became the official language of the synod.

At first the WELS did mission work in cooperation with the Missouri Synod. In 1893 it began its own work among the Apache Indians in Arizona.¹⁶ In 1922 it added the first foreign mission of its own among the Germans in Poland. In 1924 the first congregation in Lodz was started, from which the "Ev. Luth. Free Church in Poland" developed. From one part of the war refugees from this church the Diaspora District of the ELFC was formed in 1953.¹⁷ From 1935 on, the WELS took a very active role in the Nigeria Mission of the Synodical Conference, and since 1950 it has established its own mission field in Central Africa (Zambia/Malawi).

There were close contacts with our church as long as the WELS still largely spoke German. Thus in the 20s and 30s Wisconsin pastors were working for a longer time for our church in Germany: Dr. Henry Koch as pastor in Berlin, 1924-36; Dr. Paul Peters as Old Testament instructor at the seminary in Kleinmachnow. The help given by Pastor John Sullivan and Pastor Harris Kaesmeyer in Steeden in 1991-1993 was therefore nothing new.¹⁸

Is There a Wisconsin Theology?

¹¹ The constitution of the Synodical Conference in *Lutheraner*, 1871-72, p. 111. Cf. also W. Oesch, "Data zu luth. Kirchenkörpern Nordamerikas," in *Lutherischer Rundblick*, 1971, p. 45. J. Rottmann and G. Herrmann, "Das Ende der Synodalkonferenz," in *Theologische Handreichung und Information*, 1992, No. 2.

¹² E. Wolf, *Die Lutheraner in Amerika*, New York, 1891, pp. 398ff.

¹³ Synergism = cooperation of a person in conversion. For the doctrine of election cf. "Einigungssätze zwischen der Ev. Luth. Kirche Altpreußens und der Ev. Luth. Freikirche," Frankfurt/M, 1948. Thesis II.B (on "*intuitu fidei*," especially under Point 2, footnote 2).

¹⁴ For example, the *Synodical Proceedings* of the Western District, 1877 and 1879.

¹⁵ Edward C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, Milwaukee, 1992, p. 133. Hereafter cited as Fredrich, *Lutherans*.

¹⁶ Pastor Franz Uplegger worked among the Apaches and others from 1919 on. Formerly he was a pastor of our church (the ELFC) in Hamburg (1903-04). He reduced the Apache language to writing (Fredrich, op. cit., pp. 100, 170f.).

¹⁷ G. Herrmann, *Lutherische Freikirche in Sachsen*, Berlin, 1935, pp. 345ff.

¹⁸ There was also an exchange in the opposite direction. Friedrich (Fritz) Reuter, after a brief stay in Canada and Chicago, came to the Wisconsin Synod from Saxony, where he was cantor and teacher. He served as professor of music at Dr. Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota, from 1908 to 1924. Dr. Franz (Francis) Uplegger was mentioned previously.

The Wauwatosa Faculty

At the threshold of the 20th century a number of theological publications of the WELS appeared. It seems as if in certain respects the synod was setting out on its own way. Afterwards differences arose also with the Missouri Synod. This "new course" is generally known today as the "Wauwatosa Theology."¹⁹ This unusual name is derived from the place where the seminary of the Wisconsin Synod was located from 1891-1929. Wauwatosa is a suburb of Milwaukee.

The chief representatives of the new direction were three professors who worked at the seminary during this time: John Koehler, August Pieper, and John Schaller. All three were of about the same age. Together they attended the college in Watertown and then studied at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. There, so to speak, they "sat at Walther's feet." At the beginning of the century these three were called one after the other to the seminary. There from 1904 on they labored for the publication of their own theological journal of the WELS, the *Theol. Quartalschrift*.²⁰

John Philipp Koehler (1859-1951) was the son of one of the first pastors of the Wisconsin Synod. He was called in 1900 to be professor of Church History, New Testament, and Hermeneutics at the Wauwatosa seminary. In 1929 he left the service of WELS and affiliated with a small church group that separated from the WELS under protest.²¹

August Pieper (1857-1946) was one of five brothers who with their widowed mother immigrated from Pommerania. Three of these brothers became professors in America: Reinhold at the practical seminary of the Missouri Synod in Springfield, Illinois (later: Fort Wayne); Francis as dogmatician and successor of Walther at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis; and August as professor of Old Testament at the Wauwatosa seminary from 1902 until his retirement in 1941.

John Schaller (1859-1920) was a son of the Loehe missionary, Gottlieb Schaller (Loehe called him his Timothy), who later was active as a professor in St. Louis. In 1908 John Schaller was called as the successor of the deceased Adolph Hoenecke as professor of Dogmatics, Homiletics, and Pastoral Theology in Wauwatosa. He suffered an early death in 1920 as a result of the severe post-war influenza epidemic.²²

Various conjectures have been made why the WELS could come to "the change of course." Some suppose that the Wauwatosa theologians were simply interested in identifying themselves more clearly over against the large sister church in Missouri. But this is controverted by the fact that the WELS even earlier had given an independent testimony in times of controversy (cf. the election controversy) and did not want to be a poor imitation of the Missouri Synod. Others have supposed that the change came about as a result of the change in generations. In the case of Koehler, A. Pieper, and Schaller the second generation of WELS came to the fore, which had not been educated in Germany. That resulted in a break with tradition. This is contradicted, however, by the fact that during the years of the Wauwatosa faculty German was generally spoken in the Wisconsin Synod, and other professors were also active at the Wisconsin seminary at the same time, and that, for example, A. Hoenecke in the first years of the *Theologische Quartalschrift* expressed himself in the very same way (see the following).

Impetus to New Insights

The growth of some Lutheran synods in North America was caused in large part by their intensive parochial school work. The Wisconsin Synod also continually expanded the network of its schools. Because of the increasing number of teachers in the synod during the 1870s there were discussions about the call and status

¹⁹ Cf. *The Wauwatosa Theology*, 3 vols., Milwaukee, 1997; Joel Pless, "The Doctrine of the Word of God according to the Wauwatosa Theology," in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 1997, pp. 36ff.; Fredrich, *Lutherans*, pp. 114ff; Kiessling, op. cit., pp. 60f.

²⁰ Abbreviated henceforth: TQ; today, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* = WLQ.

²¹ On this see what follows.

²² Kiessling, op. cit., p. 60.

of the teachers. Opposition was expressed to the conception which at that time was generally advocated, namely, that only the office of a congregational pastor should be seen as God-ordained.²³

In the following two decades various conferences of the Wisconsin Synod concerned themselves with this question. In 1892 seminary director A. Hoenecke presented an essay to the General Pastoral Conference in Milwaukee on this subject. He came to the following conclusion:

The teacher works just as openly with the Word [as does a pastor], but he is not specially mentioned in Scripture; for that reason his office is to be derived from that of the pastor. The teacher should be called into his public office by the congregation, but he is to be supervised by the pastor; in this sense his call is divine.²⁴

In the discussion of this essay the objection was made that the teacher likewise is called by the congregation to teach the Word of God. For that reason one must also apply to him what Paul says in Acts 20:28 about the elders in Ephesus. At the end of the discussion, no agreement was reached between the opposing positions. A. Hoenecke conceded that further work needed to be done on this question.

The ministry debate then rested for a few years. In the meantime interest turned to the question of the relationship of the congregation and the synod. The occasion for this was the so-called Cincinnati case, which from 1904-1911 led to discussions in the Missouri Synod. In Cincinnati a congregation together with its two pastors excommunicated a member of the congregation in a case of church discipline. The excommunicated person felt he had been treated unjustly and appealed to the proper synodical district. The synodical district opened the question anew and held that the excommunication was unjustified. The congregation, however, refused to withdraw its resolution. Then it was suspended from membership in the Missouri Synod.

The Wisconsin Synod was affected by this case inasmuch as the suspended congregation applied for membership in the Wisconsin synod. Wisconsin rejected the application, since the sister synod's dealing in the matter was not yet finished. But as the case became known in Wisconsin, a storm arose. Advocates and opponents of the synod's action in the case developed opposing views. As a result, the question of the relationship between congregation and synod was fully discussed. In doing that, the question came up whether only the local congregation can claim to be "church" (ecclesia) or if this is true also of a synod.

More Intensive Study of the Doctrine of Church and Ministry

The Wauwatosa professors saw that these discussions required them to occupy themselves intensively with the doctrine of church and ministry. At first they were by no means agreed in the questions that had been raised. Through joint study of the Scriptures, however, they found themselves sharing a common point of view, which in the years following 1911 they set forth in various periodical articles. In this connection mention must be made also of the oft-cited essay by John Schaller, "The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry."²⁵ In it he opposes a derivation of the present-day preaching ministry from the office of the apostles

²³ Edward C. Fredrich, "The Scriptural Basis and Historical Development of WELS Doctrine of Ministry," in *WELS Ministry Compendium*, Milwaukee, 1992, pp. 771ff (hereafter cited as Fredrich, *Basis*).

²⁴ Op. cit., p. 714. A. Hoenecke went still further in taking leave of his congregation when in 1892 he became a full-time professor. In his farewell sermon he said that now he "was really leaving the ministry" (p. 601). In his future call he, to be sure, had to carry out an important assignment, but "I will now no longer be permitted to be the Lord's instrument personally in carrying out his gracious will as his servant, as one is only in the ministry" (p. 604). From: A. Hoenecke, *Wenn ich nur dich habe, Ein Jahrgang Predigten*, Milwaukee, 1893.

²⁵ First published in the *WLS Seminary Catalog*, 1911-12. English translation in *WLQ*, 1981, No. 1, pp. 30-51. Clarifying remarks by the editor of the *WLQ* article indicate the WELS today recognizes the danger that some may wish to see the public ministry as derived solely from the universal priesthood without divine institution and warns against this error (see footnote 3 on page 47).

and strongly emphasizes the universal priesthood of all believers.²⁶ He argues that in the NT—except for the apostolic office—there is no specific word of institution for a particular form of the preaching ministry (e.g., for the pastor of a congregation). In spite of this Schaller naturally knows that there must be a public ministry as soon as a congregation has assembled. He writes:

As soon as the congregation has established any kind of such ministry and has called men into it, God acknowledges it, calls these men "gifts," which he gives his congregation, and assures it that they have been placed by the Holy Spirit (Ac 20:23; Eph 4:11); for what the Christian congregation arranges to further the preaching of the gospel it does under the impulse and under the guidance of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.²⁷

August Pieper in his essay, "Conclusion of the Discussion of the Doctrines of Church and Ministry," summarizes the most important findings of the Wauwatosa faculty (1913):

1. The present-day preaching ministry is not to be derived from the apostolate, but from the congregation (the royal priesthood); for God calls the incumbents of the ministry through the congregation.
2. The office of the NT is not a legalistic, but an evangelical arrangement.
3. There is in the NT no divine institution *of a particular form* of the office (except for the apostolate).
4. The ministry of the Word and sacraments dare not be restricted to one form of the office, but can take various forms which the congregation considers necessary. But it must take place in the congregation in an orderly and upright manner.²⁸

J. Koehler writes in his 1917 *Kirchengeschichte*:

In the most recent years the faculty of the seminary in Wauwatosa defended a presentation of the doctrine of church and ministry which seems to be in opposition to that of Walther. Walther identified the pastoral office (*Pfarramt*) with the preaching office (*Predigtamt*) and distinguished the local congregation from other church bodies in that he claimed for it as for the pastoral office a special divine institution.²⁹ The Wauwatosa faculty held that the pastoral office is a species (special form) of the preaching ministry which originated in the Middle Ages in Germany, and likewise the local congregation is a species of the concept "church." In both cases it held that under "institution" one should not understand that God *distinguished these two species by a special institution over against other similar forms* of Christian and ecclesiastical life, which are also created by the gospel, but institution is a divine creation of the forms (pastoral office, local congregation, synod, teacher office, professor office, etc.) through the working of the Holy Spirit in Christendom when Christians in Christian freedom arrange these things according to outward circumstances. The dealings concerning this question have not yet come to an end, but because

²⁶ One should not blame Schaller for the emphasis on the universal priesthood even if in this he comes close to the Erlangen theologian, Höfling. He is opposing a false, Romanizing understanding of the office and in this has Luther on his side. Cf. Peter Brunner's praise and criticism of Höfling (in *Pro Ecclesia*, Berlin and Hamburg, 1962, p. 241, footnote).

²⁷ Schaller, op. cit., pp. 36f.

²⁸ Summary according to Fredrich, *Basis*, p. 778. German text of the essay in TQ, 1913. With regard to Point 2 it should be noted that the Wauwatosa theologians in no way contested the institution of the public ministry in the NT. They opposed only that a particular form (e.g., the pastorate of a congregation) can claim more divine institution for itself than other forms of the public ministry (e.g., parochial school teachers, professors). (Cf. Point 3.)

²⁹ Here, to be sure, one must ask if Koehler understood Walther himself correctly, or if Koehler had in mind only his Missouri colleagues at the beginning of the 20th century. For an understanding of Walther, cf. Carl Lawrenz, "An Evaluation of Walther's Theses on the Church and its Ministry," in WLQ, 1982, pp. 85ff. See also C. F. W. Walther, *Brosamen*, pp. 346 ff.

both sides in their hearts have the same evangelical stance in regard to the specific matters which are being considered, we may expect that there will also be agreement on the basis of God's Word concerning the intellectual understanding and manner of presentation of the doctrine.³⁰

It is self-evident that such theses would not be without opposition. In many points they seem to overthrow what had been taught till then. Opposition arose not only in the Wauwatosa theologians' own synod, but above all also in the Missouri Synod. After World War I there were a number of intersynodical discussions, but none led to agreement. In opposition to the Wauwatosa theologians the Missourians involved insisted on a particular divine institution of the pastoral office.

A certain conclusion was reached in the intersynodical discussion in 1932 in the Thiensville Theses.³¹ The theologians involved and the presidents of both synods agreed on four theses with which the controversy was officially set aside. In these theses the contested concept "divinely instituted" was replaced by the formula, "It is God's will and order." So, for example, the second thesis says: "It is *God's will and order* that such Christian local congregations have shepherds and teachers who, because of joint possession, establish the ministry of the Word in their midst."³²

In the 30s and 40s the Synodical Conference became so involved in questions concerning church fellowship that there were no further discussions concerning church and ministry. An attempt after World War II to get discussions going again through a Synodical Conference committee collapsed in 1952. The Thiensville Theses were merely reaffirmed. In the 1948 *Synodical Conference Report* there is a short summary of the two points of view:

Some restrict the divinely instituted ministry to the pastorate of a local congregation and consider the offices of teacher, professor, synodical officials, etc. as branches of this ministry, which without a specific command of God can in Christian liberty be established.

Others see in "ministry" a comprehensive concept which covers various special offices, which the ascended Lord gives to his church.³³

It must be added that the two positions of the ministry were not cleanly divided between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods.³⁴

One will, however, also have to admit that the sometimes provocatively presented original position of the Wauwatosa theology is not identical in all points with the present-day positions of the WELS. There are throughout contemporary presentations more precise expressions and warnings against imprecisions in concepts conditioned by the English language, e.g., when the term "public ministry" is involved.³⁵

Background of the Wauwatosa Theology

³⁰ Koehler, *Kirchengeschichte*, Milwaukee, 1917, p. 712 (emphasis by GH).

³¹ The name is taken from the place where, since 1929, the new seminary of the WELS has been located. Thiensville, like Mequon, the current address, is a suburb of Milwaukee.

³² Cited according to Fredrich, *Basis*, p. 762.

³³ *Synodical Conference Report*, 1948, p. 141.

³⁴ Note, for example, the essay by the Missourian E. B. Kähler in *TQ*, 1912, No. 3 and 4; or C. M. Zorn's essay in *Schrift und Bekenntnis*, 1921, No. 2, pp. 33ff. (especially at the end); or Arnold C. Mueller's book, *The Ministry of the Lutheran Teacher*, St. Louis, 1964.

³⁵ For more precision cf. the footnotes added to the translation of the Schaller essay in *WLQ*, 1961, No. 1. Against the danger of confusing concepts cf. Armin J. Panning, "The Ministry of the Seven" (Ac 6) in *WLQ*, 1996, pp. 11-17. Also the earlier criticism of W. Oesch has been accepted in so far as the WELS today is ready, in the definition of "church," to take into account more fully the connection with the means of grace (cf Discussions of the ELFK-WELS, 1989-1994).

If one reads the challenging Wauwatosa statements, the question arises, What reasons are lying behind them? If one reads the theological literature of WELS in those years (not only those dealing with church and ministry), then two problem areas are to be noted against which decided opposition was taken at that time: traditionalism and legalism.

a. *Against a false traditionalism*

What is meant by this? The feeling in the WELS was that it was wrong when arguments were based first of all on the fathers of the church instead of on the holy Scriptures. J. Koehler, for instance, wrote in an essay in 1904 about "The Analogy of Faith":³⁶

It...causes us in a controversy always to be on the defensive for the fathers and to fight with all kinds of unnecessary wrangling instead of going directly to the Scriptures.

It is the question of "Scripture or something else." It is my opinion that for a Lutheran it is immediately clear what is right, and there is nothing in all the world that can divert us from the right path, not even the "fathers."³⁷

Behind this lay an experience in the election controversy that was now injected into the WELS. At that time (about 1880) it became evident that the majority of the orthodox fathers erred in this doctrine. The Missourians under Walther's leadership went back to what Scripture and the Confessions say about this. For the opponents of Missouri that was very surprising since Walther otherwise was always accustomed to undergird his theses with countless citations from the orthodox fathers.³⁸

Now the Wauwatosa theologians did nothing other than that they raised this to be their basic principle. That only Scripture can be the "norma normans" was, of course, also clear to Walther, but in the second and third generation of Missourians there was the not-to-be-underestimated danger that they would occupy themselves more with the arguments of the fathers than with Scripture itself.³⁹

The Wisconsin men opposed this tendency (danger). They emphasized that clear-cut exegetical work was necessary. The "dogmatic standpoint" dare not suppress the exegesis of a text, otherwise the exegesis will be "dogmatically prejudiced." Such statements can be found even in A. Hoenecke's writing.⁴⁰ On this fertile soil of a so-to-speak unprejudiced exegesis the Wisconsin theses on church and ministry also grew.

One can, of course, brush this attitude aside as an overrating of exegesis that was in favor since the Enlightenment and an undervaluing of dogmatics. Or one may reject the search for the historical origin of the various forms of the preaching ministry as influenced by the historicism of that time. But one must ask if it is actually a betrayal of Lutheran theology or not rather a recognized Lutheran way of proceeding (*sola scriptura*). It should be noted that this does not involve Bible criticism, but rather an exact as possible, unprejudiced listening to Scripture.⁴¹

b. *Against Legalism*

³⁶ At that time the opponents outside the Synodical Conference ever and again argued on the basis of "the analogy of faith." Behind this concept was concealed the required agreement with the fathers of the Lutheran Church.

³⁷ J. Koehler, *Analogie des Glaubens*, in *TQ*, 1904, pp. 169ff. That he is not therewith rejecting the necessary respect for the fathers or the church's confession is shown by the context.

³⁸ Cf. Walther, *Kirche und Amt*, but also his *Pastoraltheologie*.

³⁹ W. Oesch as a trustworthy witness even speaks in this connection about a "Missouri decadence" (*Epigonentum*) (*Lutherischer Rundblick*, 1972, p. 85).

⁴⁰ A. Hoenecke, *Der Schriftbeweis der Konkordienformel*, in *TQ*, 1904, p. 115. Cf. also very similar statements by Heinrich Willkomm in *LRbl*, 1962, p. 132.

⁴¹ Cf. for this procedure, C. M. Zorn, *Das Gesetz, Eine für Theologen und Nichttheologen gegebene Antwort auf die Frage: Was sagt das NT vom Gesetz?* Milwaukee, no date (especially in the introduction).

On a second front the Wauwatosa Theology directed itself against an incipient legalism. This was, indeed, without doubt a danger which at the end of the 19th century gave the churches of the Synodical Conference a great deal of trouble. Call to mind C. F. W. Walther's evening lectures, 1884-85, published under the title *Law and Gospel*, or also Henry Schwan's (1819-1905) "*32 Thesen wider unevangelische Praxis*"⁴² which were not written without a reason.

In the Wisconsin Synod some considered the enlarged bureaucracy of the synod resulting from the 1918 merger as human tyranny (*Menschenherrschaft*). The businesslike activities of synodical officials were criticized, but also the increasing moral decay in a church that had become larger. J. Koehler, for example, presented an essay at this time to a pastoral conference on the theme, "Legalism in our Midst."⁴³ In it he emphasized that in the church more room must be given to the life-giving Spirit of God, and not everything can be regulated by laws.

This argument also played a role in the development of the WELS doctrine of the ministry. No law is any longer in force for the church of the NT; hence, the ministry of the NT cannot be a legal but only an evangelical arrangement.⁴⁴

In 1926 there was a controversial case at the college in Watertown. Synodical officials had lifted a disciplinary decision of the faculty against the student body. Two instructors thereupon under protest resigned their office. One of these was Karl Koehler, son of Prof. J. Koehler. A number of pastors joined forces with those who had withdrawn. At this time Pastor William Beitz presented a conference essay with the title, "God's Message to Us in Galatians." In it he harshly criticized church life in the WELS. He accused his synod of legalism. Repentance could be found only under the cross (i.e., only through the gospel).

The Wauwatosa faculty was requested to take a position on this question in an official opinion. The opinion drafted by A. Pieper accused Beitz of confusing law and gospel. His thesis about "repentance at the foot of the cross" neglected the role of the law in repentance. The opinion led to a break and the separation of about 35 congregations and pastors from the WELS. They formed the "Protes'tant Conference," which continues to this day and which Prof. J. Koehler joined in 1929. He took offense at the formal action taken against the protesters and in 1929-30 his work at the seminary was terminated.⁴⁵

Apart from the Protestant affair, the question about the law doubtless remained an important topic in the WELS. Recall the presentation of Prof. Paul Peters concerning in-law marriage (1942), in which he fundamentally takes a position on the validity of the law in the NT and takes away the basis for all legalism.⁴⁶ That this does not lead to antinomianism Prof Armin Schuetze showed us in his lecture at the seminary jubilee in Leipzig in 1993.⁴⁷

The Break with Missouri

During the 30s there began what has been called the creeping liberalism of the Missouri Synod. Conditioned by strong growth (1937: 1.3 million members) and the language shift (1926 from German to English), ecumenical contacts increased drastically. Discussions were initiated with liberal Lutheran churches concerning joint church work (e.g., the American Lutheran Church = ALC, which existed since 1930). In the forefront of this movement were the professors at Missouri's seminaries. They showed themselves to be

⁴² Printed in *LRbl*, 1956, No.3/4, and *THI*, 1992, No.3. [Originally published in the *Report of the 1862 Convention of the Central District of the Missouri Synod* and translated in the *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. XVI, May 1945. "An Analysis of H. C. Schwan's Propositions on Unevangelical Practice," by Prof. Carl Lawrenz, *TQ*, 1953, Nos. 3,4, pp. 189-210, 262-275, Tr.]

⁴³ Cf. Fredrich, *Lutherans*, pp. 115f.

⁴⁴ Cf. A. Pieper, "*Abschluss der Diskussion...*," in *TQ*, 1913; but see also P. Brunner's praise of Höfling in this respect.

⁴⁵ On the whole Protestant affair cf. Brug, Fredrich, Schuetze, *WELS and Other Lutherans*, Milwaukee, 1995, pp. 97f; Fredrich, *Lutherans*, pp. 154 ff.

⁴⁶ Paul Peters, "*Die Schwagerehe: Marriage to a Deceased Spouse's Brother Or Sister*," in *WLQ*, 1992, pp. 94ff; German translation of Part I under the title, "*Alttestamentliches Gesetz und christliche Freiheit*," in *THI*, 1997, No. 1.

⁴⁷ A. Schuetze, "*Der dritte Gebrauch des Gesetzes: Luthers Position in der antinomischen Debatte*," in *THI*, 1995, No. 1 and 2.

especially susceptible to the plague of the European faith in science and the underestimation of false doctrines.⁴⁸ At that time in Missouri questions were raised about practical guidelines for ecclesiastical practice. Doctrinal questions aroused little interest.⁴⁹

One could attribute this development simply to evidences of deterioration in the third and fourth generation. This is contradicted, however, by the fact that the almost equally old WELS did not go along on this way. Surprisingly, it resisted the pressure for liberalization more strongly and continued in its confessional course. It does not seem off the track to me to connect this conduct with its more conscious opposition to every kind of traditionalism and with that its stronger turning to the Scriptures, which was introduced by the Wauwatosa Theology. Such a course correction obviously was lacking in Missouri. As a result, theological liberalism soon poured over the walls of tradition.

The course of the Missouri Synod led to tensions in the Synodical Conference. The fundamental questions of church fellowship were now contested. Especially joint prayer with other churches and Christians became a bone of contention (e.g., by military chaplains, Pathfinder ['Seeker'] services). In 1951 a split from the Missouri Synod occurred. A group called The Lutheran Churches of the Reformation was established.⁵⁰ The aim was to stay with the course of Old Missouri.

In 1955 a "Common Confession" was concluded between Missouri and the ALC, which was to form the basis for the establishment of church fellowship. This unloosed a strong protest in the Synodical Conference. The little Norwegian Synod (ELS) for this reason suspended fellowship with Missouri in 1955 and later left the Synodical Conference.

In the following years there was no lack of attempts to rescue the Synodical Conference.⁵¹ Wisconsin and Missouri above all held discussions again and again. A theological delegation from the overseas sister churches traveled to America several times and offered their help (the so-called Overseas Committee). But there was no success in overcoming the opposing positions in questions of church fellowship.

The WELS no longer saw itself in a situation where it could follow the advice of the overseas men and wait any longer with the break. So in August 1961 the synodical convention resolved to suspend church fellowship with the Missouri Synod. In 1963 the Synodical Conference was also formally dissolved. Even before this a breakaway from WELS occurred: in 1958, 60 pastors with about 5000 members separated themselves from the synod because in view of the obvious false teaching of the Missouri Synod they could consider an immediate break as the only possibility. The Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) was formed.

In those years the WELS did not occupy itself only with the doctrine of church fellowship. In 1958, while WELS was still within the Synodical Conference, statements on Scripture and on the Antichrist were drawn up. Questions concerning church and ministry were also discussed. The Doctrinal Commission of the WELS presented a paper to the Synodical Conference which was then considered between 1957 and 1960. The effort was made to give an exact-as-possible definition of what is meant by "church" and "public (preaching) ministry according to Scripture."⁵² Because of the acute problems concerning church fellowship the discussions concerning church and ministry did not come to the hoped-for conclusion. In questions of church fellowship no agreement with the Missouri Synod could be achieved. WELS at that time rejected what the Missourians later called the theory of various levels of fellowship. Rejected as untenable was the Missouri view:

⁴⁸ Supporting this attitude were above all the so-called Bad Boll Conferences, 1948 and 1949. Cf. H. Kirsten, *"Einigkeit in der Lehre und in Bekenntnis,"* Gr. Oesingen, 1983, pp. 101f, 124f.

⁴⁹ Cf. Kurt Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion,* Fort Wayne, 1977, pp. 49ff.; *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly,* 1996, No. 3, pp. 122ff.

⁵⁰ The LCR exists to this day. It now has 14 congregations with about 1000 members.

⁵¹ J. Rottmann/G. Herrmann, *"Das Ende der Synodalkonferenz,"* in *THI,* 1992, No. 2.

⁵² Thus, e.g., various groups of Christians (primary and secondary) are distinguished according to their relationship to the means of grace and in so far as they are necessary or optional.

One can understand the fellowship relationships (in a congregation, in a church body, in a church federation, in an ecclesiastical association, in a cooperative church activity) as so many steps of a ladder, which require a gradually increasing measure of unity in doctrine and practice.⁵³

Prayer fellowship also should not be excluded from the questions of church fellowship (the so-called "unit concept"). Most of the doctrinal documents produced at that time are to be found compiled in the "Doctrinal Statements" of 1970.

The further course of the Missouri Synod unfortunately showed that the objections of the WELS were to the point. In 1969 there was the establishment of church fellowship with the liberal ALC, which was not withdrawn again until 1981. In the meantime, the attempts to deal with theological liberalism at the seminaries led to a change of course in Missouri in 1974. For its part, WELS acknowledged the improvements in regard to the repression of Bible criticism. The main problem, however, of Missouri's unclear attitude in the doctrine and practice of church fellowship has remained to this day.⁵⁴

Relationship to the European Free Churches

The break between Missouri and Wisconsin had consequences for confessional Lutheranism throughout the world. Tensions developed also in Europe in the succeeding years. Some European free churches saw themselves obligated by Missouri's liberal course to rethink their relationships. The Finnish Free Church suspended church fellowship in 1970. Our Ev. Luth. Free Church declared its protest against Missouri.

After the establishment of SELK in 1972 in West Germany, discussions were held with the WELS. In 1973 a SELK delegation (Prof. Roensch, Prof. G. Hoffmann, Supt. Dr. J. Schöne) held discussions in Mequon. Agreement was achieved on the following points:

1. Creation (in six days),
2. Rejection of the historical-critical method,
3. The ministry question,⁵⁵
4. Church fellowship (relationship to Missouri).

After the minutes had been festively subscribed and presented to the synod of the WELS, the SELK church council refused to give its consent. It demanded two restrictions:

1. The creation in six days cannot be made a basis for church discipline;
2. The historical-critical method is to be rejected only insofar as it totally disputes God's influence on Scripture.

Thereupon the WELS withdrew its consent to the results of the discussions. There was no hoped-for declaration of fellowship with SELK.⁵⁶ In spite of this the WELS daughter in Germany, the Ev. Luth. Confessional Church, merged with SELK.

Through the Synodical Conference the WELS was also in church fellowship with the French free church (EELSFB). In repeated discussions the WELS representatives urged the French to clarify their relations with Missouri in order to avoid prolonging a triangular fellowship. The French appealed at first to their insufficient information, later to Missouri's change of course. When all urging did not lead to a clarification, WELS in 1981 suspended church fellowship with the French free church.⁵⁷

⁵³ From "Essay on Church Fellowship" in *Doctrinal Statements*, p. 43. German translation by K. Wengenroth, 1973.

⁵⁴ Cf. Brug/Fredrich/Schuetze, *WELS and Other Lutherans*, pp. 19ff.

⁵⁵ The topic of church and ministry, surprisingly, was clarified during the first round of talks at Bleckmar in 1972.

⁵⁶ According to an account by Pastor em. Jean Bricka of France (and the manuscript "Koinonia," 1997).

⁵⁷ Bricka, "Koinonia," p. 9

Only brief reference is being made here to the ties between WELS and the Lutheran Confessional Church in Sweden and Norway, with whose antecedents and beginnings it was influentially associated (1974, especially Prof. S. Becker).

The contacts between our Ev. Luth. Free Church and WELS were interrupted by the merger of churches in West Germany which formed the SELK in 1972. During the time of the Iron Curtain and the Wall (especially after 1961) nearly all of the ELFC's contacts with our sister churches in America were made by the ELFC congregations in West Germany. When these congregations entered the SELK-merger in 1972, the ELFC in the eastern part of Germany no longer had this avenue for contacts. The relations to the sister churches had to be renewed in another way. This was done in the late 70s. On August 17, 1979, for the first time a WELS delegation (Prof. Carl Lawrenz, Prof. Siegbert Becker, Pastor Harold Wicke) came into East Germany. The discussions took place in the quarters of the Leipzig seminary (Kreuzstrasse 2). The chief topics, of course, were questions about church fellowship (triangular relations with Missouri). It was conceded at that time that we as people living behind the "Iron Curtain" had a lack of information.

On April 8 and 9, 1986, there was a further meeting with WELS representatives (Prof. C. Lawrenz, Prof. A. Schuetze, Pastor M. Janke) in Leipzig. Again the triangular fellowship relations were the topic. The WELS representatives reported on their break with the French and their plans to establish a new international synodical conference. Apart from that, the topic of church and ministry was raised by our side. Prof. Lawrenz held a guest lecture on "The Creation Days."⁵⁸

Since 1988 WELS representatives have regularly taken part in our synodical conventions (chiefly Prof. Wilbert Gawrisch). Since 1989 it has also been possible for our president regularly to accept the invitation to WELS conventions.

From 1990 to 1994 after the close of our synod conventions doctrinal discussions were held with the WELS representatives, in which, at our request, the subject of church and ministry was thoroughly talked over. On our side, the Theological Commission conducted the discussions. The discussions ended with full agreement on the doctrine by the participants.⁵⁹ The end of triangular fellowship relations in 1992 made possible the establishment of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference, organized in Oberwesel, Germany, April 27-29, 1993. As one delegate put it at the 1992 ELFC convention in Hartenstein, "The decision to terminate fellowship with church bodies that had been sister churches for many years was made with a heavy heart; the resolution to join in establishing a new federation of soundly confessional Lutherans can only be an occasion for joyful thanksgiving."

⁵⁸ Published in *THI*, 1998, No. 1, pp. 2ff.

⁵⁹ Subsequently, however, one of the ELFC participants retracted his agreement.