

Amazing Grace – 125 years of it

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You don't drive a car by looking in the rear view mirror -- not if you want to arrive safely at your destination. When you are on the freeway, looking back momentarily can be a very helpful habit, but looking back too often and for too long can be a deadly pastime.

In a sense, that's the way it is with living one's life, too. Spending too much time looking back over the past can be a very unwholesome procedure. All of us can recall visiting older people who seemed to do little else than reminisce about the days gone by. And it's just possible, I suppose, that some in our synod might fall victim to this temptation in the weeks and months just ahead. As the synod approaches its 125th year of life, there'll be the temptation to spend an inordinate amount of time reviewing the details of the pitifully small beginnings of the Wisconsin Synod back in 1850, marveling at the steps the synod has taken down through the past century and a quarter.

But I think there's an equal and opposite danger threatening the synod at this milestone in her history, and that is to ignore the past, in a laudable attempt to concentrate on the tasks of the present. Moses once spoke a significant word to the Israelite nation as it stood on the east bank of the Jordan, poised to invade and occupy its Promised Land. Moses said to God's people: "Remember the days of old!"

At this significant moment in the synod's history, it will be proper for us this morning -- and profitable, too, I hope -- to look back, but not just to Granville or, farther back still, to Germany. A look at the history of the Wisconsin Synod is a look at

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The details of this amazing grace will become clear in particularly two respects:

- I. A gracious Lord guided the synod's early development to lead her to an amazing confessional position;
- II. A gracious Lord granted the synod amazing strength to equip her for an unexpected role.

I.

Anyone hearing that the original name of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod was "Das Deutsche Evangelische Ministerium von Wisconsin" will very likely draw the conclusion that the synod had its origin in Germany. And anybody who knows anything about the Lutheran Church in Germany 125 years ago, on the one hand, and anything about the doctrinal position of the Wisconsin Synod today, on the other hand, must sense that there's a sharp conflict here. On the very face of things, we've got a miracle here. Talk about amazing grace!

Back in the early 1800's, the Lutheran Church in Germany had come upon evil days. You may remember that Luther had predicted this. 300 years earlier he had warned his countrymen that their thanklessness and indifference toward the Word could very well cause them to lose it. 125 years ago rationalism had invaded the church in Germany; the teachings of God's Word were subjected to the test of human reason instead of being accepted as sacred secrets which God has miraculously revealed to us. Rigor mortis had set in in many Lutheran churches. The words they used in their services may have been correct, for all of that, but many churches bearing Luther's name no longer drew their life from the Word of the Lord.

As a reaction against outright unbelief, on the one hand, and against dead orthodoxy, on the other, pietism had set in, a movement in the church by pious Christians who unfortunately overemphasized a sentimental personal approach to the Savior and who under-emphasized the Word and sacraments through which alone the Spirit of God creates and sustains faith.

This was the sad shape of the church in the land of the Reformation 300 years after the great Reformer's death. The lines separating the Lutheran from the Reformed churches were becoming indistinct, a process which was accelerated when the ruler of Prussia decreed a union of Lutheran and Reformed churches into a state church to be called the Evangelical Church.

This was the plant, the unlikely plant, which under God's amazing grace produced the seed which later developed into the synod of which you and I are members.

The instrument our miracle-working God used to bring the Wisconsin Synod into life was the private German mission society, which had been organized for the purpose of carrying on mission work among the unchurched. With the opening up of America's Midwest, several of these societies began to take an active interest in sending men to gather Protestant Christians into congregations. This is how Pastors Muehlhaeuser, Weinmann, and Wrede, the first three pastors of the synod, came to America's shores.

When one considers the confused confessional background of the Berlin and Langenberg mission societies, which sent our first pastors, it is perhaps not surprising to learn that these men took a very broadminded view of their ministry in their new homeland. The Langenberg Mission Society, e.g., had a board of control made up of Lutheran, Reformed, and United (or Evangelical) members, with the Reformed members in the majority. The society did not tell its missionaries which confessional stand they should take. When mission pastors organized congregations, they were urged to let the congregations decide which of the supporting church bodies they wanted to join. If, e.g., a pastor served four congregations in America's heartland, three of which were Lutheran and one of which preferred to be served according to Reformed teaching, the pastor was to tailor his ministry to suit their preferences. This was the confessional stance of the mission societies that gave birth to the Wisconsin Synod.

John Muehlhaeuser and the other organizers of the Wisconsin Synod, had a fervent love for the Savior and for His cause, but they didn't always have a clear understanding of Gospel truths, or of the vital differences in doctrine which separate the Lutheran from non-Lutheran churches. Muehlhaeuser, first pastor of Grace Church Milwaukee, and leading spirit of the founding pastors, wanted to be a Lutheran, but he disliked what he called "old style Lutherans", represented in the Milwaukee area at that time by the Missouri and the Buffalo Synods. He considered their insistence on Lutheran doctrine and practice unfortunate.

These two groups of Lutherans had left Germany for reasons of conscience; they were not in sympathy with the liberal brand of Lutheranism sponsored by the government-supported church in Germany, and had suffered persecution because of their convictions. Muehlhaeuser's background was in striking contrast. He had not left Germany because of religious oppression or in conscious opposition to conditions prevailing in the German church. Muehlhaeuser and his collaborators insisted that they were missionaries, sent to America for the express purpose of finding and gathering Christ's sheep among Protestant immigrants of German nationality, whether they professed the Lutheran, the Reformed, or the Evangelical faith. To Muehlhaeuser, doctrinal controversy between America's Lutherans was inexcusable striving about words. He demonstrated his attitude toward the Lutheran confessional writings by calling them "paper fences". In Muehlhaeuser's eyes, Missouri and Buffalo were too intent on insisting on the letter of God's Word, while lacking in an evangelical spirit of love. Muehlhaeuser feared that this strict attitude would be a hindrance to bringing the Gospel to the thousands of German pioneers flooding into the Midwest.

It was to be expected that the young Wisconsin Synod would come under sharp attack from the older Missouri Synod. The small Wisconsin Synod group was branded "new style Lutherans", "a suspicious bunch" who did church work "under the false colors of being genuinely Lutheran and whose ministerial practice was unionistic.

These were the beginnings of the Wisconsin Synod. Although we cannot agree with the doctrinal position of those first pastors, we can understand their position. It was only natural that Muehlhaeuser,

Weinmann, and Wrede should feel a bond of friendship with and gratitude to their mother church in Germany. The unfortunate result was that they vacillated between strict Lutheranism and a more broad-minded attitude urged on them by their sponsors on the other side of the Atlantic. As we in these two anniversary years contemplate the one-word theme the Synod has chosen as its anniversary theme, we must marvel that God's amazing grace is to use C.S. Lewis' term, unscrupulous; it seeks out the most unlikely recipients. God permitted the young synod plant to sprout from the most unlikely seed.

God's amazing grace showed itself to be not only unscrupulous, but also powerful and persistent. Out of the indecision and the confessional confusion of those early years, our amazing God led the Wisconsin Synod gradually and steadily to confessional clarity. In this hour of the young synod's need, the Lord consistently raised up teachers and leaders after His heart, men who spoke the Word which enlightened men and united their hearts in the truth.

In 1860 the synod assembled for its 10th annual convention in Fond du Lac. The roster of pastors included 21 names. At this convention Muehlhaeuser resigned as president, because of advancing age, and John Bading became his successor. Bading, pastor of St. Mark's Watertown, and later of St. John's, Milwaukee, served as president of the synod for more than 25 years. Although Bading himself had been sent to America by the unionistic Langenberg Mission Society, God's amazing grace let him play a large part in redeeming the Wisconsin Synod for sound Lutheranism, even though this ultimately involved severing ties with the German mother church.

At the synod convention three years later another new name was noted on the roster of the synod's pastors, a name that was destined to become very prominent in the history of the Wisconsin Synod and, indeed, of American Lutheranism. That was Adolf Hoenecke. In raising up this man to be a leader and a spokesman for true Lutheranism for half a century, God again showed amazing grace. For Hoenecke was another product of the German university system. He studied at the University of Halle, which was not only permeated by the spirit of rationalism, but was the leading exponent of rationalism, this spirit which is so hostile to the supernatural character of Bible-based religion. Hoenecke accepted the offer of the Berlin consistory to serve a term as pastor in America under an arrangement which the Berlin Missionary Society had with the Wisconsin Synod. His American service was to count toward a later appointment in a congregation of the Prussian Union. Hoenecke's wife was the daughter of a Reformed pastor in Switzerland. It was surely to be expected that Hoenecke would foster the Union's cause in America. But God's grace usually does the unexpected. It did here.

Three years after he came to Wisconsin, Hoenecke was called to the Synod's new seminary, then at Watertown. His being called to be the theological leader of the young synod seems somewhat analogous to Luther's being called as professor of theology at the new University of Wittenberg. Hoenecke's new calling compelled him to dig deeper into the Scripture and into the Lutheran confessions, and it was here that he came to clarity, at a time when many in the synod were groping and stumbling.

The amazing grace of God quietly brought about changes in the synod, so obviously unsure of itself. At convention after convention, positions were taken and resolutions were passed in the direction of true, Bible-based Lutheranism. In 1868, two years after Hoenecke was called to the seminary, the synod convention declared itself opposed to altar and pulpit fellowship with heterodox. The Wisconsin Synod therefore withdrew from the General Council, a group of Lutheran synods.

Such spiritual maturing, just like physical growth, was not without growing pains. When the synod withdrew from the General Council, the president of Northwestern College left the synod in protest, together with several pastors. In view of such serious difficulties between the president of the school (Prof. Martin) and its theological professor (Prof. Hoenecke), it's not surprising that the enrollment suffered. Since the German mission societies who were sponsoring the synod's activity wished to have the synod admit all German Protestants to Lutheran altars and pulpits, the 1868 convention resolution was virtually a break between the synod and its German sponsors. Even over the distance of a century one can readily realize what a painful decision this was for the synod to make. A struggling young church had to sever ties of friendship and love; it was forced to appear ungrateful; and -- by no means the least -- it had to face the loss of financial support.

An amazingly gracious God has, however, promised His children: "Christian, you put Me first, and I promise you that you will lack for nothing that you need for body and soul," God kept that solemn promise to the Wisconsin Synod in those crisis years. As the ties between the Wisconsin Synod and heterodox bodies gradually loosened and finally were officially severed, the ties between the Wisconsin Synod and orthodox Lutheranism grew stronger. Gradually the fathers of the synod came to recognize that the strict Missouri Synod was the church that held fast to the truth of the Gospel. Relations with Missouri grew friendlier; meetings were held to discuss fellowship. In 1868 the two synods officially recognized each other as true Lutheran churches and established full pulpit and altar fellowship. The following year they agreed on a plan for cooperation in using the synodical institutions of the two synods.

The year 1872 brought a development which was destined to be the greatest significance for the cause of true Lutheranism in America. At a convention in St. John's Church, Milwaukee, the Missouri and the Wisconsin Synods, together with four others, established the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference. Only God knows, and only eternity will reveal, the countless blessings that came to American Lutheranism through the Synodical Conference. Standing squarely on the Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, the Synodical Conference's one ark of distinction was loving, living obedience to the revealed Word and will of her Lord. It was an effective instrument for expressing and propagating true doctrinal unity and the fellowship of faith.

The way from Galilee and Jerusalem to Wisconsin via Berlin and Langenberg was not a direct route. God did not take the easy way to get His Word to 400,000 Christians of the Wisconsin Synod today. The history of the Wisconsin Synod's first quarter century, like the history of the New Testament, is not the record of easy and effortless Gospel triumphs, one after the other, in rapid and glorious succession. The Synod's history is rather the record of man's frailty and rebelliousness, and of God's amazing grace. The fact that Wisconsin stood where she did after her first quarter century of life was in no way traceable to man's effort or intent. The synod had become what her founders had not intended her to be. A gracious Lord guided the Synod's early development to lead her to an amazing confessional position. In the idiom of the psalmist we say: "This is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our eyes!" In the idiom of the hymn writer we say simply: "Amazing grace!"

II.

That was the synod's first quarter century. How about the century since then? Here again the amazing grace of God is clearly evident. A gracious Lord granted the synod amazing strength to equip her for an unexpected role.

It was mentioned earlier that the Wisconsin Synod did not experience the sort of rapid growth in its first years that, e.g., the Missouri Synod did. Wisconsin experienced no rapid influx of tens of thousands of loyal Lutherans emigrating from Europe's troubled shores. Loyal Lutherans were looking for something else than what Wisconsin had to offer in those difficult and troubled years. Growth therefore came slowly. But growth did come. The Lord granted the strength needed to fulfil an unusual assignment which He had in store for the synod. Numerical strength came by joining hands with likeminded synods--in 1892 with the synods of Minnesota and Michigan; and in 1904 with the Synod of Nebraska. In 1917 these groups were constitutionally amalgamated into the "Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States" It is spectacular evidence of the grace of God that the five pastors and 18 congregations which constituted the synod at its organization 125 years ago have today grown to 800 pastors and 1000 congregations. God has reenacted the parable of the mustard seed before our very eyes.

Every child of God knows that in a church numbers alone do not constitute strength. The gracious God who wanted to strengthen the Wisconsin Synod to fulfil an unexpected role gave her strength of another sort: a strong theological seminary.

During the first dozen years after its founding in 1850, the Wisconsin Synod had no seminary of its own. The young synod looked to outside sources for its pastors and missionaries. As we have seen, some came from the Berlin and Langenberg Mission Societies in Germany. A few came from Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary in Pennsylvania. Other applicants came from a wide variety of sources, sometimes questionable ones. As years

went by, the growing confessional consciousness of the Wisconsin Synod made the unionistic German mission societies more and more reluctant to provide workers for a synod which was unwilling to permit its pastors to minister also to the Reformed people according to their own teaching. The seriousness of this situation is highlighted by two statistics from the year 1862. In its first dozen years of life, the synod had grown from five pastors to 26, but the 1862 report lists 13 vacancies. No wonder Pres. Bading was led to remark in his presidential report of that year: "We must dig a well in our own country!" The following year, 1863, the Synod opened its seminary in Watertown, first in the school building of St. Mark's Church, and later in conjunction with Northwestern College. Although the first candidate was graduated in 1865, classes for the first half dozen years were pitifully small.

Those first half dozen years of the seminary's existence were also the years in which our fraternal relationship with the Missouri Synod was being clarified and cemented. One of the decisions which accompanied the declaration of fellowship between the two synods was the decision to merge their worker training facilities. The college department at Watertown was to provide pre-seminary training for the students of both synods. The Wisconsin Synod seminary department at Watertown was to be transferred to St. Louis and combined with the Missouri Synod's seminary. The two synods were to exchange professors. For a period of eight years, therefore, from 1870-1878, the Wisconsin Synod had no seminary of its own.

It soon became clear to the leaders of our synod, however, that this joint arrangement could not continue indefinitely. On the one hand, the calibre of our St. Louis trained men was high. Francis Pieper, Reinhold Pieper, August Pieper, John Ph. Koehler were some of the Wisconsin Synod men who studied there. But at a time when the young synod sorely needed pastors, the number of our graduates was averaging only 23 per year. It was also feared that increasing dependence on the Missouri Synod Seminary for Wisconsin Synod pastors would lead to greater dependence on Missouri, and perhaps ultimately to absorption by Missouri. As a result, the Wisconsin Synod resolved in 1878 to reopen its own seminary, in Milwaukee. One may summarize by saying: God's assignment to our synod in the 1860 's was to become consciously and purposefully Lutheran in doctrine. In the 70 's that doctrinal position had to be defined in relation to other church bodies. The big task of the 80's was to train the next generation of pastors.

Although the new seminary in Milwaukee was small, its distinctive characteristics began to emerge, characteristics which--please God--may always remain the characteristics of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Foremost among these was and is its approach to the study of the Scripture. The first seminary instructors -- Hoenecke, Notz, Graebner, and later Koehler, Pieper, Schaller -- emphasized the historical and grammatical interpretation of the Scripture. Instead of interpreting a Bible passage on the basis of some agreed-upon system of doctrine, students were introduced to the background and general content of the Scriptural books and then were led into the study of the paragraphs, sentences, phrases, and words of the sacred books.

Understandably, this type of careful Scripture study requires an acquaintance with the languages in which God originally saw fit to have His Word written down. And right here a quiet word of warning may be in place. It surely is no secret that we live in an age when interest in theology has declined markedly. Most theological students are no longer interested in serious Bible study, or are willing to invest the long and sustained effort to master the tools of Bible interpretation - notably the acquisition of Greek and Hebrew skills. This is not the mark of a strong seminary program. Nor is it a mark of strength when a pastor, while preparing each week to mount his pulpit with the message: "Thus saith the Lord" is himself content to use only secondary sources to ascertain what the Lord actually hath said. It is not an accident, but very tangible evidence of the amazing grace of God that the very first objective of the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary listed in its catalog is "reverent, thorough, and scholarly study of the Holy Scriptures and a clear apprehension and faithful application of its contents."

By increasing the size of the synodical body, and by developing its theological seminary the Lord was equipping the Wisconsin Synod for a task. No one could have foreseen it a century ago or even a half century ago, but the Lord in His amazing mercy had an unexpected role for this synod: to stand pretty much alone in striving for the truth of the Gospel, pretty much alone in preserving and transmitting to our own generation and

to generations yet unborn the precious Lutheran heritage of the old Synodical Conference. A gracious Lord granted the Synod amazing strength to equip her for an unexpected role.

God has not called the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod to be just a respectable, middle class church body, offering people an outlet for their religious and charitable inclinations. The Wisconsin Synod is a group of men and women, each with the sign of the cross on forehead and breast, whom the Spirit of God has called to do God's will. The Wisconsin Synod is a channel through which God proposes to affect the hearts and lives of 20th century citizens whom God desperately wants as members of His family.

This is the role God in grace has assigned to the Wisconsin Synod. In a world where a preponderant share of church activity is activism, ecclesiastical busy work, the Wisconsin Synod needs to remember that the deep hurt of the world is spiritual, and that nothing less than a spiritual remedy will suffice. The cure must be related to the disease. People are asking: "Is there life after 30?" America's leading contemporary dramatist has pretty well summarized the philosophy that is handed down to them and which they accept. Life has a meaning if you're bucking for heaven. But if heaven is a fantasy, we are in this jungle with whatever we can work out for ourselves. It seems to me that the cards are stacked against us. The only victory is how we take it. We citizens of the 20th century are trying to satisfy the deepest longings of our souls, but we don't know how. We're spiritually hungry, so we fill our stomachs. We long for peace, so we take pills. We crave security, so we go out and make money. We demand relaxation, so we get drunk. No wonder this is often called a lost generation!

Surely our synod dare not concur in the superficial and dangerous generalization that the people of our world are pleasure motivated and pleasure-mad. The evidence usually offered to support this (namely that people spend so much time at bars and brothels and racetracks) is less than convincing. People today are lonelier and emptier than ever. There is all too often the empty pleasure, the joyless satisfaction of the condemned prisoner who eats his better-than-usual last dinner, knowing it will be his last. In this tired, bandaged, disillusioned world God has called us to be His torchbearers.

It has to be one of the ironies of history that the same sort of perverse theology which hobbled the German church two centuries ago is rendering today's Protestant churches ineffectual. Or, to bring the irony closer to home: the same sort of imported German liberalism which caused the Wisconsin Synod such grief 125 years ago is rising to haunt the Lutheran Church again today. History has repeated itself. Germany has again these past decades exported a rationalistic brand of theology to America. And let there be no misunderstanding: you and I are threatened by it.

I refer, of course, to the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation. When Adolf Hoenecke studied at the University of Halle over a century ago, one of his instructors was Dr. Hermann Hupfeld, an Old Testament scholar who is usually called "the father of the documentary hypothesis" of the first five books of the Bible. According to this hypothesis, Moses is not the author of these books, although the rest of the Bible (and in fact the Lord Jesus Himself) gives Moses credit for being the author. Instead Hupfeld argued that a careful study of the history and the language of the so-called books of Moses shows evidence of their being a composite document, consisting of four separate documents or fragments, each written by a different person. In Hupfeld's mind, some Jewish editor centuries later scissored and pasted the four documents together into their present form.

This is the documentary hypothesis, and this is part of the theological heritage Adolf Hoenecke got from his teachers. Isn't it ironic that we, his children, are being urged to believe the same sort of teaching today? Let me read you several excerpts from three books on New Testament studies recently published by a Lutheran publishing house.

“The New Testament Gospels were written to express a very definite theological point of view, and not to record history.” “The basic ingredient of the Gospel tradition are the memories of Jesus, but these memories were modified and supplemented drastically in the one or two generations which passed between the time of Jesus and the time of the writing of the Gospels.”
Wm. A. Beardsley, *Literary Criticism of the NT*; Fortress, 1970, P. 26

The four Gospels were all written by men other than those whose names they bear. The Gospels are made up of individual sayings and stories, joined together by various editors. The aim of the Bible student is to get at what he feels are the original forms of the Bible books. We can never be certain of the authenticity of any actual miracle story in the Gospel. The words and works of Jesus in the Gospel reflect the theology of the early Christian community.

Edgar V. McKnight, *What is Form Criticism?* Fortress, 71 1970, P. 17 & 22

Matthew, Mark, and Luke were not at all interested in historical accuracy, but rather in putting across their own theological points of view. Much in the Gospels is simply the result of the theology of the evangelist who wrote each one.

Norman Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* Fortress, 1969, P. 69

You recognize immediately that this different approach to the study and the understanding of the Scripture is what's at the heart of the controversy swirling at this very moment about Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. What shall we say? Shall we say: "Am I glad our synod and its members are not exposed to this kind of liberal theology"? Or shall we perhaps say: "We fought our battles in the 1950's and early 1960 's, and I'm glad they're over"? The old evil foe still means deadly woe. Each of us must daily say with Hares Bronson:

"I walk in danger all the way,
The thought shall never leave me,
That Satan, who has marked his prey,
Is plotting to deceive me."

God has assigned to the Wisconsin Synod the not-so-easy job of being a canary in a wilderness, of being a small voice striving to uphold the authority of the Word of God. You know as well as I that most American Protestant churches are long past the stage where they could get excited about striving to uphold the absolute authority and the utter truthfulness of God's Word. Enough of the religious world is sowing the seeds of doubt. We dare not. Martin Luther once said, "Spiritus Sanctus non est scepticus". The Holy Spirit isn't a doubter, and He doesn't create doubt. God has called our synod into existence, and He has called us to be members of the synod, so that we can let His voice speak loudly and clearly and authoritatively in this world of doubt.

Think of how the Wisconsin Synod has touched the lives of countless thousands in years past. Many of us met our Savior in this synod. Chief Shakumbila told one of our synod's first representatives to Africa: "My forefathers knew about a god before the white man came. But we did not know that God had a Son, and that He sent His Son to speak to us". Our role is to strive for an authoritative and a truthful Word not just for the sake of striving, not in order to be able to brag that we have Sound doctrine, but in order to share it with people who are living aimlessly or perishing desperately without it. We need to let people know that on the pages of Scripture God has given us His very own Truth, that there He has revealed His Sacred Secrets to us, that through the perfect life and the innocent death of Christ every sinner has been reconciled to God, that in union with Jesus Christ life does hang together, does make sense, and that living close to Jesus Christ now is the only proper preparation for the next world, where God wants us to live at His side.

For us to have an inspired and inerrant Word to have for ourselves and to share with our world required the struggles and the suffering of many men, men whose innermost nature resisted and recoiled at the thought of struggle just as much as your nature or mine does.

But remember: God made us receptacles of His grace. Still more: God made us channels of His grace. He made us not only His children, but His coworkers, laboring together with Him for the salvation of a world lost in ignorance and in rebellion and in doubt and in pessimism.

Let's get our role real clear. The Lord of the candlesticks has not called us to be eyewitnesses of Christ's death and resurrection. That call was extended to His first apostles. Neither is it our task to rediscover a Gospel which had been lost through centuries of abuse and corruption. That is the task God assigned to Martin Luther.

But God has called us to treasure His Word as God's truth. In that Word alone we can find our way back into God's family. And God has called us to share that Word with our generation, with growing numbers of citizens of the 20th century, many of whom haven't yet learned to call God Father.

This was our Lord's business, and it's our business, because it's our Father's business, and He asks that you make it your business.