

The Ministry of Robert G. Johnston

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Introduction

When the Wisconsin Synod broke fellowship with the Missouri Synod in the early 1960s there were well publicized meetings among synodical leaders. There were well-documented struggles at both synods' conventions. In contrast to these "high profile" events are the individual stories, not set on a stage in front of hundreds of delegates, but set in the quiet of a pastor's study. Because of the events which took place within in the Synodical Conference many pastors were forced to dive into the Scriptures and look themselves in the mirror. Much of the story of those times is not the story of the confession of a synod, but rather the shared confession of thousands of individuals who each made his confession. This paper documents one of them.

I. Early Life

On October 11, 1926, a child was born to Herman and Martha Berkhahn. Public record states that Herman, the child's father, worked as a pipe coverer and had been born 52 years earlier in New York State. Martha Berkhahn, the baby's mother, was 31 at the time of the birth and Wisconsin is listed as her home state with "housewife" listed as her occupation. The registration of birth certifies that the child was healthy, male, white, and legitimate.¹ His name is listed as Robert Berkhahn.

Young Robert's early years were not like those of other future pastors. Before he could get to know his son, Herman Berkhahn disappeared (perhaps under the pressures of the Great Depression. Robert was left with no memories of his birth father.² Not too many years later, though, Martha Berkhahn (nee Kremer) moved on and remarried. She wed Earl Johnston, also of Milwaukee. Earl was the only father Robert would ever know

¹ Milwaukee County Public Records. Registration of Births, Vol. 930, Page 249.

² Mark Johnston, <mjohnston@africa-online.net> "Information," 4 December 2005, personal e-mail (4 December 2005).

and the son took the name of his adoptive father. Robert Berkhahn's name was legally changed to Robert Glen Johnston.

Although things had been put in order outwardly, things were not in order spiritually. He was baptized in his home on his fifth birthday, but besides this Pastor Johnston recalls only a "loose connection to Christ" in the house.³ His son, Mark, perceives that life in the Johnston house in the 30s was "definitely not easy."⁴ Nothing seemed to suggest a future in ministry. Robert attended public schools through the 9th grade.

God, however, had something in mind for that little boy. In the late 1930's Earl Johnston took a job as custodian of St. John's Lutheran Church in Milwaukee on 8th Street and Vliet.⁵ Earl's son, Robert, came into contact with the church's pastor, John Brenner.⁶ Despite the fact that the public school attending, adopted son of the church's janitor may not seem like the ideal candidate for the ministry, Pastor Brenner saw the God-given gifts in the boy and suggested the boy study for the ministry. As a result of this evangelical encouragement Robert promptly enrolled for the 10th grade at Milwaukee Lutheran High School for the specifically stated purpose of studying for the ministry. Perhaps it was the contrast of his sudden change from public to Christian education that instilled in young Robert the appreciation for Christian education that would be so evident in his ministry.

³ Robert Johnston, <rgcjohnston@aol.com> "re: Bio", 3 December 2005, personal e-mail (3 December 2005).

⁴ Mark Johnston, e-mail

⁵ Robert Johnston, <rgcjohnston@aol.com> (no subject), 6 December 2005, personal e-mail (6 December 2005).

⁶ Besides being pastor of St. John's, Pastor Brenner also served as Synod President at this time.

After graduating from Milwaukee Lutheran High School in 1944, Robert G. Johnston took the next step enrolling at Northwestern College in Watertown. He would attend that institution for only two years because back in Milwaukee Robert had met a girl named Esther Blumner. Pastor Dan Malchow, also a student at Northwestern College at the time and Johnston's future associate, remembers that Robert and Esther were "very much in love."⁷

So, in 1946, after Robert's second year at Northwestern, he and Esther were married. A wedding picture shows the young couple on the day of their marriage. The height difference between the tall, thin groom and his much shorter bride is obvious, but personality contrasts were also evident to all who knew the young couple. Robert was reserved and thoughtful while Esther was energetic and vociferous. The personalities complimented each other perfectly and would later also serve Robert's ministry well. Esther would play a major role in her husband's life of service.

This marriage, however, was not only the start of a new family it also meant the end of the young groom's time at Northwestern College which had a policy against the enrollment of married students at the time. Robert, still determined to study for the ministry, decided to move 250 miles to the south to Springfield, Illinois with his new wife. At the Springfield's Missouri Synod seminary there were no rules forbidding students from marrying.

At this time liberalism was already creeping into the teaching at the Missouri Synod seminary in St. Louis. The Springfield seminary (considered the "practical

⁷ Daniel Malchow, <drmalchow@wauknet.com> "Interview Response," 6 December 2005, personal e-mail (6 December 2005).

seminary” of Missouri Synod⁸) had no such problems. The liberalism which was already afoot in St. Louis was not evident in Springfield. Rev. Johnston describes it as being “very conservative.” Mark Braun describes the mood in Springfield in February of 1946, just a few months before Johnston’s arrival, “The faculty of Concordia Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, also responded, charging the signers of *A Statement* [of the 44] with approving selective fellowship, ‘which ignores the brethren in your own synod,’ ... Springfield’s faculty directed its concluding paragraph against the signers of *A Statement* from Concordia, St. Louis: “What a pity that leaders in our church are strengthening the laity and the young in our Synod in this trend instead of restraining them from following the ruinous inclination of their Old Adam.”⁹ Looking back on it Pastor Johnston also remembers the faculty as being “very conservative” and “not happy with what was going on in St. Louis.”¹⁰

I. In the Missouri Synod

Upon graduation from Springfield in 1950, Robert received a call to a dual parish in Canada. He was sent to serve to congregations in Ontario near Kichener; St. Peter’s, New Hamburg and St. John’s, Baden. Heading north, ready for the ministry the almost-ordained Rev. Johnston describes himself, “Not having come from a pastor’s family I was idealistic in my expectations... I never expected Christians to act the way they did.”¹¹

⁸ Daniel Deutschlander, <deutschdm@sbcglobal.net> “Church History Project,” 4 December 2005, personal email (4 December 2005).

⁹ Braun, Mark E. *A Tale of Two Synods* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003) pg. 183. quotes from notes of F. S. Wenger, faculty secretary (carbon copy).

¹⁰ Robert Johnston, e-mail, 3 December

¹¹ Robert Johnston, e-mail, 7 December

Some difficulties would stem from the churches' history. The two churches were independent but called their pastors from the Missouri Synod. Their previous pastor had been "liberal and ecumenical."¹² The two churches had the tendency of their former pastor. Right away, in his first call into the public ministry, Pastor Johnston's was forced to consider questions of confessionalism.

Besides doctrinal and fellowship issues the churches also did not seem to have a great appreciation for their ministry. Paul Johnston tells the story, "[Esther] found it a bit improper and perturbing that someone called her up on a Saturday to tell her to make sure the pews were properly dusted since the woman did not want to get her new Sunday clothes dirty from dust."¹³

After just two years in this atmosphere, Pastor Johnston accepted a call to another dual parish. This time they relocated to two country churches in northern Wisconsin- St. Paul's, Town of Pine River and St. Matthew's, rural Merrill. For five years, from 1952-57, Pastor Johnston served these two country churches. Meanwhile, he took advantage of an opportunity for personal study and by the end of his time in northern Wisconsin he had earned a BA and BD from Concordia Seminary St. Louis by correspondence.¹⁴

Although on the ministry front things may have been basically uneventful, in the Johnston home things were anything but uneventful. In Canada two boys had been born, Paul and Mark. While in Merrill two more boys were added to the family, Timothy and Peter.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Paul Johnston, <dakotadad@aol.com> "Some Answers," 5 December 2005, personal e-mail (5 December 2005).

¹⁴ Robert Johnston, e-mail, 7 December

After these five years, though, Pastor Johnston received and accepted another call. This one took the Johnston family to St. Paul, Minnesota. There Rev. Johnston became Professor Johnston at Concordia. During three years at Concordia Prof. Johnston taught Latin and Religion. After the isolation of a difficult situation in Canada and the geographic isolation in rural northern Wisconsin, he also remembers enjoying the “camaraderie with fellow faculty members and with the students.”¹⁵

Once again, as at Springfield, Johnston found himself at a then-orthodox Concordia. This “camaraderie” was perhaps so satisfying because it was based in real fellowship. Professor Daniel Deutschlander, whose first years in the prep department of Concordia, St. Paul coincided with Prof. Johnston’s three years there, says it was at Concordia, St. Paul that he learned the biblical definition of fellowship.¹⁶ According to both sources it seems that, at least for a time, this Concordia enjoyed theological orthodoxy. According to Prof. Deutschlander, by the time he arrived in the college department at this institution that this orthodox position had been abandoned. This, however, occurred after Professor Johnston had accepted yet another call.

The “camaraderie” with students was also enjoyable for Professor Johnston. Somewhat surprising that Professor Deutschlander recalls that the all male student body was generally “out for blood” in the classroom, that they routinely “ate teachers for breakfast,” and that they were generally a “rough bunch to teach.”¹⁷ While sharing those recollections about the behavior of the student body, another student in the prep department of Concordia at the time, Pastor Oliver Lindholm, states, “[Professor Johnston] related well to the students and had good classroom control (with our class that

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Deutschlander, e-mail

¹⁷ Ibid

was always a challenge). He had a dry sense of humor which went over well... He took time to answer questions and didn't put you down for it. He had a humble demeanor and commanded respect."¹⁸ Professor Deutschlander concurs by saying, "He was in every way a gentlemen."¹⁹ And Pastor John Braun remembers, "[When] we were juniors... he moved to Australia and we dedicated the Junior/Senior Banquet to him."²⁰

III. To Wisconsin by way of Australia

This interest in Christian education would continue as the Lord led him to accept another call in 1960. This call was not only to another country as the call to Canada had been. It took the family to the other side of the world. Johnston received a call to be headmaster at Concordia College, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia. He called it, "The most difficult call I have had to consider."²¹ Could he move his family of five to the unknown down under? The answer was "yes" and during the summer of 1960 the family flew to San Francisco and there boarded a boat in bound for Australia.

Crossing the ocean, Robert G. Johnston not only traveled a great distance but he was also going to a place that would be a turning point in his ministry. The first task at hand would be learning the way things were done in Australia. Concordia College, Toowoomba was not a "college" in the American sense of the word. It was actually what we would call a high school. It was co-ed and many students lived in dormitories. The school was associated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia (ELCA) which was in fellowship with the Synodical Conference in 1960. Several years after Headmaster

¹⁸ Oliver Lindholm, <ohlindholm@aol.com> "Church History Paper," 10 December 2005, personal e-mail (10 December 2005).

¹⁹ Deutschlander, e-mail

²⁰ John Braun, <braunj@nph.wels.net> "WLS Senior Church History Paper," 6 December 2005, personal e-mail (6 December 2005).

²¹ Robert Johnston, e-mail, 7 December

Johnston was back in the U.S.A. this church body would merge with the more liberal Australian Lutheran church body, the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia (UELCA). During his ministry there, however this spirit of unionism was not a major issue.

Although this union struggle may have been years away, the new headmaster found plenty to keep himself occupied in Australia. First, the house provided by the school for the family came without an indoor toilet and with only a wood burning stove for cooking. Esther Johnston, understandably, was not initially impressed with these accommodations. The situation at the college for Headmaster Johnston was also far from perfect. As he recall, “My predecessor remained on the faculty, one of the faculty member had been assured that he would receive the call as headmaster when my predecessor retired (obviously he was by-passed). He in turn had a brother on the faculty and in addition these two faculty members were on the college board. Add to that, I was a foreigner coming in to operate the school. It was simply a no-win situation.”²²

With all these problems Pastor Johnston remembers, “I often wondered why the Lord called me there.” The Lord in his wisdom, of course, had a plan. Looking back years later, he sees God’s two-fold purpose in calling him to Australia.²³ First, it was God’s plan for Robert and Esther Johnston to find a daughter. During these years they served as foster parents for orphaned kids. While in Australia they adopted one of these children, a girl named Kathy. While in Australia a sixth child was also born, Thomas, the fifth son.

²² Robert Johnston, e-mail, 7 December

²³ Ibid

Pastor Johnston, looking back in time, also sees God's gracious hand using the call to Australia "to bring me into the WELS."²⁴ A curious situation (getting to Wisconsin from Missouri by way of Australia) gets even more curious when you consider that a major influence on Johnston's decision to switch was Kurt Marquart who remains a prominent voice in the Missouri Synod.

The situation developed like this. Shortly after Headmaster Johnston assumed his position in Toowoomba, recent Concordia St. Louis graduate, Kurt Marquart, arrived in town to serve as a pastor in the ELCA. Unlike Johnston, who up to this point had been on the outside of the confessional battle raging in the Synodical Conference, Marquart had been right in the middle of it. He had been a leader of the counterattack against liberalism on the seminary campus in St. Louis. It was even suggested that this was the reason he was "shipped out" to Australia.²⁵

Marquart arrived in Australia still single and with his parsonage not yet finished. He moved in with the headmaster's family awaiting his fiancé's arrival²⁶ and the completion of the parsonage. During this time and for the rest of their time together in Australia the two pastors formed a close friendship that survives to this day. They talked doctrine, orthodoxy, fellowship, and of the associated problems in the nearly dead Synodical Conference. Marquart, coming from the front lines of the battle, to some extent "opened the eyes"²⁷ of Johnston, who up until this time, had mostly remained on the sidelines.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Paul Johnston, e-mail

²⁶ When she arrived a couple months after he husband-to-be, Esther Johnston was a bridesmaid in the wedding.

²⁷ Mark Johnston, e-mail

Meanwhile, at Concordia College, Toowoomba issues were coming to a head for the headmaster. Combined with the political in-fighting was also an underlying legalism. An oft-repeated family story speaks of this situation, “The girls [at the College] were not to communicate with the boys, nor vice-versa. Once, one of the teachers caught some girls ‘oogling’ the boys through the outside windows of the chapel. The teacher sent the girls to grandpa (the headmaster) for a caning. [He] couldn’t do it in clear conscience.”²⁸ Besides being disturbed over this and other examples of legalism, Johnston also recognized the confessionally uncomfortable position, in which he (along with the ELCA) was now situated. It was now 1964 and the Synodical Conference was nothing more than a memory. This church in Australia, however, still considered itself in fellowship with both Missouri and Wisconsin. The last piece of the puzzle was the fact that, back in Milwaukee, Earl Johnston, Robert’s father, had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. With all these factors weighing on him, Headmaster Johnston made a difficult decision- he turned in a letter of resignation to the Concordia College board.²⁹

Although times had been tough for Johnston during his ministry as headmaster, the decision to resign was also difficult for his family. Kathy, a native Australian and almost a teenager, would have to leave the only country she had ever known. All the kids recall the emotional response of Esther when told of the decision to leave.³⁰ The family had not only grown used to life in Australia, but they had grown to love it. More changes were soon to follow.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ According to Pastor Johnston this letter actually had been written two years earlier. It included the reasons for his resignation with what he saw as the problems at the school, but he did not want to make a “spur of the moment” decision. When he finally decided to resign he simply changed the dates and handed the letter to the college board.

³⁰ Paul Johnston, Mark Johnston, Peter Johnston, e-mails

Robert Johnston, now in between calls and maybe in between synods, crossed the Pacific alone. He went now to be with his dying stepfather and to evaluate the state of Lutheranism in America. He first spoke with people from various Missouri Synod institutions of higher learning. For a time, he was considered for positions at these institutions. He remembers, though, being questioned closely on his association with Kurt Marquart. Many seemed hesitant to seriously consider him because of this association with Marquart.³¹ The message was clear: it was those who held firmly to their confessional stance who were considered dangerous in that synod.

Johnston then turned to the Wisconsin Synod. He talked to Professor Siegbert Becker, who himself had recently switched synods. He spoke with Pastor Buenger, president of the Southeastern Wisconsin District. He decided, in his own words, that “it was time to stand up and be counted.”³² He felt it was no longer possible for him to remain in Missouri in order to “strengthen the conservative forces.”³³ He met with a committee which included synod President O. J. Naumann, District President Buenger and a seminary professor. Since he was coming from the ELCA (Australian version) which was still in fellowship with the WELS this meeting was not considered a colloquy. He does remember, though, being closely questioned at this gathering concerning his orthodoxy. However, when all was said and done, he was cordially accepted into the ministerium of the Wisconsin Synod.

IV. In the WELS

At the same time in Milwaukee one of the two pastors of St Lucas, one of the largest congregations in the synod at the time, had recently retired. President Buenger,

³¹ Robert Johnston, e-mail, 7 December

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

district president, suggested to the congregation that Pastor Johnston serve as vacancy pastor. On January 1, 1965, he began serving as vacancy pastor at St. Lucas along with Pastor Daniel Malchow, who had been serving the church of 2,000 members by himself. Pastor Johnston called for his family. They returned from Australia to move into a house near St. Lucas.

On February 1, 1965 President Buenger presented a call list to the voters of St. Lucas. One of the names on the call list naturally was Pastor Johnston's. Malchow recalls that the assembly decided to call Pastor Johnston to serve at St. Lucas on the first ballot.³⁴ He would serve there for the next 11 years.

Johnston still describes his years at St. Lucas as some of the most enjoyable of his ministry. Synod records state that while the membership slipped slightly during these years some other statistics that point to spiritual growth went up. The number of communicants who regularly communed increased dramatically and the number of member considered voters almost doubled.³⁵

God blessed Pastor Johnston's ministry both by those he served with and those he served. Dorothy Loomis, the longtime secretary at St. Lucas still remembers Pastor Johnston's dedication to the ministry- his love for the people and their love for him.³⁶ Two men who served as councilmen during Johnston's years at St Lucas, Loren Loomis and Bill Snamiska both remember the patience with which their pastor handled everything and the fact that they never saw him angry.³⁷

³⁴ Malchow, e-mail

³⁵ Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Statistical Reports. 1965-2000.

³⁶ From personal interview done at the Loomis home on December 7, 2005

³⁷ From Loomis interview and personal interview in Snamiska home on December 8, 2005

Pastor Johnston also enjoyed his time with his associates. He served with Pastor Daniel Malchow from 1965-68 and with Pastor Carl Leyrer from 1968-76. Pastor Malchow recalls, "I cannot recall ever having a serious disagreement with Bob. I would describe our relationship as having been remarkably good. Bob was well disciplined and had a good grasp of the ministry in which he was involved. He has a pleasant personality and related well with people."³⁸

During the early 70's Pastor Johnston was also approached by Northwestern Publishing House to write a book.³⁹ The work, eventually entitled *The Scriptures: Sacred Fact or Pious Fiction?* was extremely timely as people heard of the events surrounding the Seminex walk-out in St. Louis and "neo-orthodoxy" was the rage among many Lutherans. The book was written in laymen's terms to explain the importance of the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. In the book Johnston states, "The Scriptures are sacred fact! To say anything less is to undermine, minimize or destroy the foundation of the Christian faith... That the Scriptures are indeed sacred fact is the only solid foundation for faith and salvation not only for men of previous ages, but also for us of the twentieth century."⁴⁰

Clearly, Pastor Johnston was unquestionably and firmly confessional in stance. Loren Loomis describes him walking the narrow Lutheran way, "He said what the Word said and that was it!"⁴¹ Malchow remembers not a single problem after the switch from Missouri, "He was in full agreement with the doctrinal position of the Wisconsin

³⁸ Malchow, e-mail

³⁹ Robert Johnston, e-mail, 7 December

⁴⁰ Johnston, Robert. *The Scriptures: Sacred Fact or Pious Fiction?* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1970).

⁴¹ Loomis interview

Synod.”⁴² His stature as a theological leader was also evident as he was chosen to serve as circuit pastor.

While maintaining a firm position as an author and pastor, Pastor Johnston spearheaded a push to build a second Lutheran high school in Milwaukee. It got to the point where he even had negotiated a deal for the purchase of a property on the corner of 30th Street and Mitchell. Although in the end the high school was not founded, Pastor Johnston’s lifelong interest in Christian education was again evident.

It was soon after that Pastor Johnston received a call to serve as principal of Michigan Lutheran High School (a position reserved for pastors at the time). So, in 1976, after accepting the call, it was off to Stevensville, Michigan. Pastor Johnston describes MLHS as being already “fairly well established” when he arrived.

While serving as principal, Johnston once again turned to scholarship. This time, he pursued an advanced degree through Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. As part of these studies he went to Tel Michal, Israel for an archeological dig. He also penned a lengthy thesis entitled “Does Scripture Teach Millennialism: An Exegetical-Expositional Study of the Passages of Scripture which are used to Support the Millennial Doctrine.” As a result of these studies he would receive an S.T.M. from WLS in May of 1983.

In 1981, after five challenging years at Michigan Lutheran High School, Johnston got a call back into the parish ministry. The call was to St. Paul’s in Beverly Hills, Florida and he was led to accept this call. It would be his last.

When he arrived he found a church that reflected the community- everyone was retired. Synodical statistics show that in 1981 St. Paul’s had 90 baptized members and 88

⁴² Malchow, e-mail

communicants.⁴³ Pastor Johnston recalls that besides him there was only one other member of the church who even held a job.⁴⁴ Beverly Hills, Florida was definitely a retirement community. Pastor Johnston, with the experience that came from St. Lucas and its many shut-ins, adapted to the new situation. The Loomises, who several times took trips from Milwaukee to Beverly Hills, Florida several times, remember Pastor Johnston being such a good fit for the congregation because “the older people just love him.”⁴⁵

His good relationship with the retired people continued to serve him well, but meanwhile, through the years, both the church and the community grew and changed.⁴⁶ By the early 1990’s the congregation had gotten younger and a generous donor came forward with money to build a school. The church jumped at the opportunity to provide Christian education for their children and perhaps children from the community. So, the church, which just ten years before had not had enough children to form a Sunday School, now was building a school.

It was during this exciting time, though, that God called home Esther, Pastor Johnston’s wife of almost 48 years. It happened suddenly in early 1994 when she died of a heart attack in the parsonage at the age of 67. She had supported her husband through his entire ministry and through three different countries and four different states. She left behind 6 children, many grandchildren, and the many friends she had made at every one of those many stops. Her and her husband’s personalities may have been very different,

⁴³ Statistical Reports

⁴⁴ Robert Johnston, e-mail, 7 December

⁴⁵ Loomis interview

⁴⁶ The congregational statistics show that by 1993 the church had 173 baptized members and 25 of those were children.

but they complemented each other well and the marriage had been a blessing to him throughout his ministry.

After her death he continued serving in the ministry. St Paul's Lutheran School in Beverly Hills, Florida opened for classes in August of 1994. Pastor Johnston continued serving as pastor of his church and, once again, as circuit pastor. On August 6, 1996 he remarried. His new bride, Cecelia, was Pastor Johnston's companion through the end of his ministry. Then, after 47 years in the ministry, on May 31, 1997, Rev. Robert G. Johnston retired from the ministry.

Although now technically retired, Pastor Johnston has not given up serving his Lord. He continues preaching on occasion and filling vacancies. He is also president of the board of directors of A Mighty Fortress, Inc. In this capacity he is organizing the building of a WELS Lutheran retirement community in Beverly Hills.

Conclusion

When people speak of "humble beginnings" they usually use it to form a contrast, as in "Abraham Lincoln came from humble beginnings, but someday he would be President." Pastor Robert G. Johnston definitely had a humble beginning, but saying he came from humble beginnings, does not form a contrast but rather a theme. By God's grace and through God's power Pastor Johnston maintained the humility of his youth and used it to God's glory through a life of service in his kingdom.

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Addenda 1: Timeline

Robert G. Johnston

