

The Brothers Franzmann: A Strengthening Influence on the Bible-
Based Theology of the Wisconsin Synod

by

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Background

The history of Lutheranism in North America has seen many influential families in its midst. The Falckners of New York and the Henkels of New England are examples of families that played major roles in American Lutheranism, especially within their respective church bodies. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has one such family in its midst that stands out as making a lasting contribution to its history. This contribution will probably not be seen in future years as one that reshaped the WELS. Rather the contributions made by three of Pastor William Franzmann's sons, Werner, Martin and Gerhard will most likely be seen as strengthening and enhancing the solid scriptural theology of the Wisconsin Synod.

Setting this family apart from all others within the synod is its diversity of influence. The Franzmann's have in some way touched nearly every aspect of life in the WELS. One cannot long remain a member of the Wisconsin Synod without in some way, shape or form coming into contact with the work of these three men.

In order to have a clear picture of the brothers Franzmann and their influence within the WELS, it is helpful to know a little about their roots and background. As mentioned earlier Werner, Martin, and Gerhard were the sons of Rev. William Franzmann. William Franzmann was born in Germany where he was well educated and worked as a lawyer's clerk. Unable to join the Prussian army because he lacked the physical ability, he decided to cross the ocean and try life in America.

The year of his arrival in America could not be found out. However, he arrived in Milwaukee, finding employment with a farmer in Franklin, Wisconsin. While working on the farm, William Franzmann developed a close friendship with Pastor H. H. Ebert, who encouraged him to go into the ministry. He graduated from Northwestern College in 1894 and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1897. He was subsequently called to serve as assistant pastor to then Synod President, Philip von Rohr at Winona, Minnesota. Four years later, 1901, William accepted the call to be pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church at Lake City, Minnesota. Here nine children, six boys and three girls, were born to William and his wife Elsie (nee Griebeling). Werner was the second child, Martin the fourth (the third son) and Gerhard the youngest of the nine.

After serving twenty-two years at Lake City, William Franzmann accepted a call to serve two small congregations near Stillwater, Minnesota - Bay Town and Graff townships. Gerhard characterized his father as a dedicated hard working pastor who instilled in his children a high sense of value and devotion to duty. He never pressured any of his children to go into church work, but let them know the opportunity was available to them to serve the Lord in this way. Subsequently, three of his sons did enter into the full time work of the ministry.

Their mother, Elsie, is said to have loved hymns. Gerhard remembers how she would have her English or German hymnal open while ironing and would sing hymns - "She was a lover of music." Perhaps this is where Werner and Martin were first influenced toward hymn writing.

Werner H. Franzmann

Werner H. Franzmann was the elder of Martin and Gerhard. He was the second son and second child in the family. Born 1905 in Lake City, Minnesota, Werner grew up along the banks of the Mississippi River between La Crosse, Wi. and the Twin Cities. He and brother Martin were blessed with an elementary education in St. John's Lutheran School in Lake City. Uncertain about going into the ministry, Werner attended one year of public high school before going on to Northwestern. Skipping his sophomore year of high school, Werner was enrolled as a quartaner (junior) at Northwestern - a move that chagrins him to this day. The jump from a freshman to a junior made for some rough going at the start of his Northwestern days. Nevertheless, Werner was able to cope, and made his way through high school and college. As a college senior he was editor in chief of the Black and Red. Obviously the missing year of high school didn't stunt his learning to a great degree. Completing the required course of study, Werner graduated from NWC in 1925 and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1929.

Werner Franzmann's first call was to serve as tutor at Northwestern. He was disappointed that he was never given a taste of classroom teaching during his two years at Watertown. His teaching was limited to the tutoring of three preparatory students. Little did he know that he would get a whale of an opportunity to teach in the ensuing years.

In 1930 the Lord extended a call to Werner to be a parish pastor in Coloma, Michigan. Accepting the call, he found himself in the midst of a challenge. Prior to his arrival the

congregation had been torn by petty disputes. However, by the grace of God he was able to smooth the problems; in his twelve years as pastor in Coloma the congregation tripled in size from 70 to 220 communicant members.

From a fruitful parish ministry, Werner H. Franzmann in 1943 was called by the Lord to Michigan Lutheran Seminary to be dean of students and professor of religion, Latin, and English. Now he would get a mouthful of the teaching he so desired while at Northwestern. He was kept frantically busy with the deanship and twenty-five class hours per week with no repeated classes. As dean of students and professor of religion, Werner was to give a solid biblical background to many former teenagers who are presently pastors, teachers and laymen in the Wisconsin Synod.

After five years, he deemed it best to lighten his work load by resigning the deanship to better apply himself to the teaching of his classes. Werner remained at MLS for fourteen years. Although they were busy years, he says he enjoyed them immensely.

In 1956 the Lord sent another challenge to Werner Franzmann by leading him to accept the call to be the first full time editor of Northwestern Publishing House (NPH). Before this time the editorship of NPH had been filled part time by Prof. Siegfried Fenske. Not satisfied with the LC-MS's Portals of Prayer devotional booklet, the NPH board of directors decided to begin the printing of its own booklet. It was for this undertaking that Werner Franzmann was called to be the first-full time editor of Northwestern Publishing House.

Delving into this task, Werner within six months was ready to print the NPH counter part to Portals of Prayer - Meditations.

The intent of Meditations was to supply a short, pointed Scripture based devotion geared for the layman and his family. This was a tremendous undertaking. Largely due to the guidance of Werner Franzmann, Meditations has become what it is today. It is probably safe to say that no other devotional booklet has been used as widely by WELS members since 1956 than the NPH Meditations.

Although he enlisted pastors to write most of the devotions, Werner recalls spending countless hours of revising to make them more appropriate and edifying for their readers. This single publication, began and maintained by Werner Franzmann for twelve years, has brought solid Bible-based theology to the dinner tables and bedrooms of more WELS members than any other synodical publication.

As the editor of Northwestern Publishing House, responsibility for The Northwestern Lutheran (NWL) also fell on Werner's shoulders. He recalls that the work load was tremendous. However, for the first few years Siegfried Fenske assisted him as a co-editor of sorts, allowing him to get his feet on the ground in such a demanding position. As the editor of the NWL Werner says he tried to make it a solid teaching magazine containing timely articles to address current issues. He also tried to brighten it up through the use of appropriate hymns and poetry. Like the Meditations, the NWL has made and continues to make its way into the hands of many WELS people. Under his guidance many a layman as well as pastor and teacher have been kept informed about the work of their synod, and more importantly received a wealth of sound nurture in the holy Scriptures.

During his editorship, Werner was also to play an important roll in the Wisconsin Synod break with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. He was elected to be the chairman of the floor committee during the 1961 Wisconsin Synod convention when fellowship with the LC-MS was severed. Werner recalls that it was a very difficult position for him to be in. Having relatives in the LC-MS, including his brother Martin H. Franzmann, a professor at Concordia St. Louis, it tore at his heart to break with Missouri. Yet, Werner knew that he had to put those feelings aside and abide by the principles set down in Scripture. He said, "It was the hardest thing I ever did."

Following his tenure as editor of NPH, Werner accepted a call (1968) back into the parish ministry to serve a congregation in Ann Arbor, Michigan. During his four years at Ann Arbor, he also served on the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations. In 1972 Werner retired from the ministry. Presently he resides in Westfield, Wisconsin, near Montello, where he continues to write, compose and translate German writings.

Werner Franzmann's realm of influence on the Wisconsin Synod is far from over as he continues to write in his retirement. Long after the Lord calls him home, the Wisconsin Synod will show the results of having such a gifted man in its midst. Much of the work that he has done will live on after him. During his years as editor of NPH, Werner wrote three Bible study courses covering the book of Acts. In his retirement he has also written an Old and New Testament Bible History commentary. The New Testament volumes will be published later this fall. Attesting to the quality of his commentary, DMLC has made it standard issue for its students

and graduates as a resource book to replace the Rupprecht and Kretzmann Bible commentaries. The WELS Board for Parish Education has also recommended its use for Sunday School teachers.

Werner's influence will cross over into yet another aspect of synodical life with the advent of the WELS New/Revised Hymnal. Five of his hymns (texts) are presently being considered for incorporation by the Hymn Committee. It is interesting to note that Werner was not naturally inclined toward hymn writing. His involvement with hymnody began when he translated Prof. Adolf Hoenecke's lenten sermons "Glorified in His Passion" and "A Lamb goes Uncomplaining Forth." Werner says Hoenecke often made use of hymn verses in his sermons. This got him started at hymn translating, which has resulted in his translating of thirteen hymns to date. Prof. James Tiefel says that both Werner and Martin had a gift for translating German hymns into English, "They had a feel for both languages." However, Werner must not have chosen popular hymns to translate as none of his translations are presently being considered for the New/Revised Hymnal.

As a composer Werner terms himself "a late bloomer." He was fifty years old before he wrote his first hymn and that out of necessity. As editor of the Northwestern Lutheran he wanted to use some original hymns to set off the festival issues. Not satisfied with anything he viewed, Werner decided to write them himself. This led him into a new aspect of service in the Lord's kingdom, which resulted in the composing of sixteen hymns. Most likely more than one of his hymns will be part of the new regiment sung in WELS congregations as five are being considered by the Hymn Committee.

In an age of hymnology that is typified by shallow, trite theology, Werner's hymns contain much doctrinal and Scriptural meat. Verses 1 & 2 of his hymn "With One Voice God's Holy Spokesmen" are representative of his style and content.

- 1 With one voice God's holy spokesmen
 Sound forth Christ the Risen One,
 Show that God calls out to sinners:
 "My redeeming work is done!
 'Twas your sins I laid upon Him;
 Now repaired see all your loss.
 Lo, I raised Him! Your transgressions
 All are nailed to Jesus' Cross."

- 2 Long ago o'er 'saddened Eden
 Broke a wondrous, cheering light:
 Satan's venom would be fatal,
 Seem to sink man's hope in night;
 Yet the Women's Seed would conquer,
 Crush by death the Serpent's head
 Even here God speaks by Moses:
 "Seek not Christ among the dead!" (WS 754)

In circumspect, Werner H. Franzmann's career in the full-time work of the Lord has done much to strengthen and augment the solid Bible-based theology of the Wisconsin Synod. It is also evident that his work will have a lasting influence in nearly every aspect of life within our church body. We hope and pray that the Lord will extend his time of grace and the use of his gifts to further strengthen the Lord's kingdom.

Martin H. Franzmann

Martin H. Franzmann, born January, 1907, was two years younger than Werner. Like his older brother, he also attended St. John's Lutheran Elementary School, Lake City, and went one year to

public high school before transferring to the preparatory department of Northwestern College. While at Northwestern, Martin distinguished himself as an able linguist and composer. Professor em. Erwin Scharf, a college classmate of Mart, as he calls him, remembers students standing in line to get a look at a weekly comic strip he would write, with illustrations done by Siegfried Fenske, called the "Frosh Bosh". Professor Scharf also remembers Mart's tremendous gift to compose songs from the top of his head. While setting up the auditorium for community concerts or college productions, it was not uncommon for Martin to come up with a story line that included nearly everyone present, put it to a tune and supply a refrain so that everyone could join in the singing.

At NWC Martin was also president of the Philomatean, now the Forum Society, as well as the editor in chief of the Black and Red. Already as a quartaner (junior) in the Northwestern prep department, Martin began distinguishing himself as a poet and gifted writer. Many of his poems found their way to the cover of the Black and Red.

Martin in addition had a wonderful gift in the area of language. He gave the English oration for his graduating class of 1928 entitled, "The Genius of Shakespeare." Martin possessed a seeming limitless vocabulary. If there wasn't a word or phrase in the English language to capture a thought, he would coin one. His command of the English language would later serve him well for his work in God's kingdom.

The NWC Board of Control must have thought highly of Martin's abilities. Due to the suspension of Professor Sauer from the NWC

faculty for fellowship reasons, a vacancy was left for the teaching of English and Greek. The Board of control called on Martin, who had just graduated from NWC, to fill this position from 1928 - 1930.

After teaching two years in the college classroom, Martin switched to the other side of the desk, enrolling at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1930. However, his seminary graduation would suffer still more delays. The following year he attended the University of Chicago (1931 - 1932). In 1933 he married Alice Bentzin. For one year he taught elementary school with his new wife at St. Peter's (LC-MS) in Cleveland, Ohio. It was here that Martin was influenced greatly in his interest toward Christian hymnody by his friendship with the late Reverend Arthur F. Katt. Katt urged Martin to use his poetic gifts to translate a number of German Lutheran chorales. This would serve as a launching pad for Martin's stellar career as a hymn writer.

In 1935 Martin entered the Seminary again, but as a senior. He is probably the only graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary who skipped the Middler year. Upon his seminary graduation (1936), Martin received the call to teach at NWC once again in the field of the classics. Although he nearly flunked Greek in his early days at Northwestern, Martin was an outstanding Greek scholar. He was famous for his knowledge of New Testament Greek. According to his brother Gerhard, he practically knew his Greek New Testament by heart.

Martin himself was instrumental in the introduction of New Testament Greek to Northwestern students. Although he never taught NT Greek as an NWC professor, Martin pushed for its

inclusion the curriculum. Werner Franzmann said that before this time a student could go through Northwestern and not know what a Greek New Testament text looked like.

Martin also instilled in his students a high work ethic. He made a deep impression on many of his students. He expected much from his students, yet, they were willing to work hard for him. Martin remained at NWC until 1946 when he accepted the call to teach New Testament at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis.

Although Martin would never return to the Wisconsin Synod, he would continue to enlighten and enhance its biblical theology indirectly through his publications and hymns. I will proceed with a listing of his publications with a brief note concerning each;

"Alive with the Spirit" - Contains short meditations and devotions based on Bible passages.

"Concordia Commentary: Romans - Martin uses a down to earth writing style, drawing from his classical Greek background to give insights into Greek concepts and figures of speech.

"Follow Me; Discipleship according to St. Matthew" - A chapter by chapter study of the Gospel of St. Matthew, but not by word. Martin uses common language and few theological terms. A good tool for the layman.

"Grace under Pressure: the way of meekness in ecumenical relations." - Spells out in what ways we can relate to Christians of other denominations without compromise.

"Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets" - 16 sermons: good reading for pastors, also a good example of Martin's ability to use lofty language.

"Pray for Joy" - A collection of Martin's prayers; he uses highly expressive language, possibly too flowery for the common man, however, they are excellent prayers for use by the pastor.

"Preaching notes on the Gospel according to St. Luke" - Martin supplies background information concerning Luke and his Gospel, then summarizes the Luke texts in the

ILCW Series C. Very helpful for giving a basic understanding of each text.

"The Revelation to John: A Commentary" - Contains an excellent explanation of the historical setting of Revelation. It is a verse by verse interpretation of the the book; not extensive but a good overview.

"The Word of the Lord Grows: A first historical Introduction to the New Testament" - Explains the context in which each book was written; includes an outline of the each book's purpose and content; provides many timely applications.

"Concordia Self-study Commentary" - Written in conjunction with Walter Roehrs. Martin wrote on the Minor Prophets and the entire New Testament. A very useful resource for students of the Bible; very popular within the WELS.

Martin's publications occupy space on many WELS pastors' bookshelves. His exegesis is considered by the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary faculty to be extremely sound.

As alluded to earlier, Martin also composed and translated hymns. A complete list of his hymns and translations was unable to be obtained. However, it is known that six compositions and one translation of Martin's are presently being considered for the New/Revised hymnal. "Thy Strong Word did Cleave the Darkness" is indicative of Martin's gift of hymn writing. Martin had a knack for expressing deep Scriptural truths in a fresh and uplifting manner. Observe the first two verses of "Thy Strong Word did Cleave the Darkness."

1. Thy strong word did cleave the darkness;
At thy speaking it was done;
For created light we thank thee,
While thine ordered seasons run:
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Praise to thee who light dost send!
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia without end!

2

Lo, on men who dwelt in darkness,
Dark as night and deep as death,
Broke the light of thy salvation,
Breathed thine own life-breathing breath:
(Refrain) (WS 747)

Martin H. Franzmann was called to his eternal rest March 28, 1976. In spite of his passing Martin has had and will continue to have a strengthening influence on the sound biblical theology of the Wisconsin Synod. Many pastors serving congregations in the WELS and a number of WLS professors received their initiation into the study of Greek under his direction absorbing his high standards of translation. Like brother Werner, Martin has done much that will remain part of the WELS for years to come.

Gerhard Franzmann

This brings us to the youngest of the Franzmann family. Born in August 1918, Gerhard was only four years old when his father moved to the Stillwater area. With no parochial school nearby, Gerhard attended public elementary and high school. However, in public high school he was provided with four years of Latin, making it possible for him to step right in with the freshmen class at NWC in 1937. His parents spoke German at home, supplying him with a sufficient knowledge of that language to begin the NWC freshman course. Because of the depression Gerhard was delayed one year from entering NWC. During that year he worked full time at the Andersen Window Co. in Minnesota.

When he did reach NWC, Gerhard had the unique experience of having his own brother (Martin) as a teacher. He recollects how Martin never called him by his first name, but always Franzmann. Graduating from NWC in 1941, Gerhard continued on to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary from which he graduated in 1944 among a class of seventeen.

His first call was to Immanuel Lutheran Church in New London, Wisconsin as assistant pastor to Walter Pankow. As a green horn straight out of the Seminary, with no vicar year under his belt, he was given an incredible work load. He was to teach a fifth and sixth grade class of forty-five students full time as well as make hospital calls three or four times weekly (which also involved visiting any members from other WELS churches staying at the hospital), visit a full page list of shut-ins every month and preach once a month in German and English. On top of that he also taught a confirmation class in Shiocton, Wisconsin. Gerhard claims he was "really busy; everything since then has seemed relatively easy."

In 1946 he accepted a call to a congregation of 300-325 communicant members in Dale, Wisconsin, where he served for four years. From Dale he was called to Bethany Lutheran Church (1950), a mission congregation in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. Continuing in the pattern of accepting calls to ever smaller congregations, Gerhard went as a missionary (1952) to Seattle, Washington to serve a congregation of thirty-five communicants. Remaining in Washington for five years, he then accepted a call (1957) to Divine Savior (now Apostles Luth.) Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. While

there he taught part time at Wisconsin Lutheran High School as a senior religion and English instructor.

After two short years (1959) at Divine Savior, he accepted the call to teach high school Latin and English at Northwestern in Watertown. At that time there was no separation between the high school and college. Gerhard says, it was not unusual for a professor to begin at the high school level then move to the college courses.

Gerhard began by teaching Latin and English for three years until he was asked to fill the vacancy left by Prof. Gehrke (1962) in the college History-religion course. For a number of years he straddled the prep and college departments of Northwestern. Later he moved completely to the college level teaching Latin and OT History-religion. At the retirement of Prof. Lehman he also took on the History of Art which brother Martin had taught years earlier at NWC.

Unlike his brothers, Gerhard has not published any books or done any writing and translating of hymns. However, as a pastor of five congregations and a college professor for twenty-five years, he has certainly touched the lives of many in the Wisconsin Synod, as a pastor and professor. For twenty-nine years he has been training men, future pastors, in the knowledge of OT Bible history. About two-thirds of the pastors in the Wisconsin Synod learned their Latin and Old Testament history at his instruction. He says "it's a good feeling to listen to one of his former students preach a sermon. They don't turn out so bad after all." At the present Gerhard plans to continue his professorship at NWC, transmitting his knowledge to yet another generation.

Conclusion

The brothers Franzmann, Werner, Martin and Gerhard, have made a distinct impression upon the synod in which they grew up. They have contributed sound and meaty theology to its educational standards, its instructional materials, its training of ministerial workers, the devotional lives of its members, and its worship of God in song. Their work has without a doubt bolstered and enriched the Scripture-based theology of the Wisconsin Synod. No other family in the history of the WELS to date has contributed so much and in so many ways to its doctrinal and confessional health.

Wissenschaften
1920
1921