

THE HISTORICAL - CRITICAL METHOD
AND ITS ENTRANCE & ADVANCE
IN LCMS UNTIL 1961

Alois Schmitzer III
Church History
Prof. Fredrich
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Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
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Mequon, Wisconsin

Officially and ostensibly, our Wisconsin Synod terminated fellowship with the Missouri Synod, and ended its membership in the Synodical Conference in 1961 on the charge of unionism, but a far greater, more basic evil was at work in the Missouri Synod's ranks which well might have replaced unionism as the Wisconsin Synod's chief complaint against Missouri. That is the destructive evil of the historical-critical method, or Neo-Orthodoxy, as it is also called. Couple this heresy with Missouri's doctrine of the church, and you have quite a difficult situation to contend with. Pastor Herbert Lindemann feels that Missouri's new doctrine of the church is the basis of their trouble. This new way of thinking about Church came into prominence in the Missouri Synod after 1945. Dr. Theodore Graebner, in his 1949 Bad Boll essay, "Church and Churches," in effect said that congregations are Church, synods are not!¹ Lindemann states that this change proved to be for the worse: "In time, however, the cure became worse than the disease, because the inadequate new doctrine of the church could not register, much less resist the relentless corrosion of Christian substance taking place under the banner of the modern Ecumenical Movement."² Tension in the synod came to a boiling climax at the New Orleans convention in 1973 partly because of their doctrine of the church. But still, I believe at the root of their problems was the invasion of the historical-critical method. Rev. Kurt Marquart, who battled the historical-critical method already during his student years at St. Louis Seminary, agrees: "It is clear that the Biblical Principle in the Missouri Synod crumbled under pressure from the historical-critical approach, which was naively mistaken simply for objective scholarship."³

Where did this approach slip into Missouri scholarship? The Missouri

Synod (LCMS after 1947 and hence in this paper) grew out of confessional Lutheranism of the 1800's that fought against Rationalism and Prussian Union. The Bible, Church, and Confessions were essential keys to the men who founded the synod in 1847. In the early part of this century there was great resistance among Lutherans to any new ideas in doctrine, practice, or society. They were against the ideas of modern theologians and ecumenical dreamers. Exceptions were found, mostly in the General Synod in the East. Warnings against accepting the idea of Christian self-consciousness or Christian experience as a source of theology appear often in the literature of all the synods, as well as repeated rebukes on the reliance on the standard of rationality in spiritual matters. "Only those who have given up the final authority of Scripture are attracted by such groundless theology" was the feeling.⁴ The Synodical Conference, formed in 1872, of which LCMS was a member, rarely had anything good to say except for the most traditionally confessional German Lutherans. Anyone who advocated new theological methods or emphases were rejected quite quickly.

It should be noted that Lutheranism and religion in general were coming under much influence and stress from the outside around the turn of the century. Lutherans in the early 1900's not only fought critical study of the Bible, but evolution too. With the Eastern church bodies being several decades "ahead" in matters of cultural consideration than strongly immigrant, Midwestern groups, agitation about evolution appeared in General Council and General Synod in the 1870's and 1880's. In 1884 Milton Valentine's inaugural address at Gettysburg Seminary called for evangelical faith to come to terms with science and be ready to adjust if the new theories on evolution were proven. And in 1914 Carl Sodergren of Augustana Seminary said that evolution and the Bible could be consistent with each other.⁵ To Midwestern

synods the Eastern synods' reconciliation of evolution and Scripture was just another proof that fellowship with them was out of thought.

Social gospel also raised its ugly head around 1900, probably in reaction to the industrial revolution's sweatshops, child labor, poor work conditions, monopolies, crime, and other failings. Again, it began mainly in the East. Philadelphia Pastor Edwin H. Delk (of the General Synod) "lamented that social justice, once part of the gospel, had been shunted aside by doctrine, organization, and individual salvation."⁶ He summoned Christians to right the wrongs. What could possibly be more important than doctrine and salvation for individuals?

What is the historical-critical method? Rev. Kurt Marquart explains:

The historical-critical method arose out of the rationalistic Enlightenment and differs from traditional biblical scholarship in that it insists on treating the Bible not as an unquestioned authority, but as one ancient book among others. All biblical statements are therefore open to challenge before the court of sovereign human reason. Historical criticism understands itself simply as the general scientific method applied to past events, namely history. This means that the critic and his reason are judge and jury, while the Bible, like all other ancient documents, is on trial, whether as defendant or as witness; for even as a witness its credibility depends entirely on the findings of the critical "court."⁷

The historical-critical method of Bible study is rationalistic humanism, pure and simple. Some historical critics are more radical or conservative, depending on their boldness and "respect" for the Scriptures. Basically, it amounts to a rejection of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, and leaves the door wide open for rejecting any or all of the Bible and

interpreting it in whatever way you please. It is rather obvious why any faithful theologian would oppose such a method.

The historical-critical method, or Neo-Lutheranism or Neo-Orthodoxy, as it was also called, was mainly developed and imported to American seminaries from European thinkers such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and John Ballie. Many Lutherans were overwhelmed and lost their critical faculties in encountering this brilliant group of theological celebrities. Many figured since Barth opposed old-style liberalism and was quite successful that he represented a return to the Reformation -- hence the term "neo-orthodoxy." But, although Barthianism was better than old liberalism because it stuck to sin and grace, redemption, justification and other basic Christian concepts, going from historic Lutheran orthodoxy to Barthianism was still a giant leap to liberalism because it rejected biblical authority. Since this destroyed Scripture's foundation and Barth realized the historical-critical method could produce nothing but dead bones, he added a new theological interpretation, the "New Hermeneutic." In this he desired "that we endeavor to see through and beyond history into the spirit of the Bible, and then offered an interpretation that did not inquire about Paul's message to his original readers, but related the biblical text directly to the situation in which modern man finds himself."⁸ Compared to Barth's dynamic new teachings, old ways seemed stale. "Whatever the intellectual and theological merits of the new approach, it certainly conveyed a sense of excitement. Therein probably lay its chief appeal," Marquart claims.⁹ Add to that Barth's high-octane flow of words, pietistic rhetoric, and lack of precision, and his views became quite palatable.

The historical-critical method found its way into LCMS after first conquering the ULCA (now LCA) and ALC synods with whom LCMS was in contact

during this century. By 1930 theology professors in ULCA were using the historical-critical method openly, led by C.M. Jacobs at Philadelphia Seminary.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, fellowship talks between LCMS and ULCA during 1936 and 1938 proved fruitless. According to "Concordia Theological Monthly," LCMS hesitated at ULCA's inability "to accept the statement of the Missouri Synod that the Scriptures are the infallible truth 'also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters, John 10:35.'"¹¹

Next, ULCA turned to ALC. ULCA men tried to use the word "inspiration" without really meaning inspiration. ALC's "Minneapolis Theses" (1925) was clearly in disagreement with ULCA's "Washington Declaration" on the topic of inspiration, yet they kept up negotiations and in 1940 came to a union in the schizophrenic "Pittsburgh Agreement." The ALC's main champion for inerrancy during these talks was J.M. Reu of the Iowa Synod's Dubuque Seminary. But Reu yielded to the Pittsburgh Agreement's wording on the Bible as "a complete, errorless, unbreakable whole of which Christ is the center," even though ULCA President Knobel beforehand had said that the ULCA would never accept "a fundamentalist interpretation of inerrancy."¹² Meanwhile, LCMS during the 1930-40's remained unyielding against inspiration and inerrancy questions. Even men with a softer line on fellowship, especially towards ALC, did not give in on the matter of strict biblical authority. Dr. William Arndt and Prof. Theodore Graebner, St. Louis Seminary professors, were big defenders of Scripture in LCMS at that time.

A ripe environment for, or perhaps the first glimpses of, the historical-critical method appeared in an ecumenical movement within LCMS when "Round Table" talks, ending in 1945, were held by concerned pastors, professors, and synod officials "to consider problems of an ingrown legalism and traditionalism."¹³ They drew up the "Chicago Statement," or "Statement of 44,"

as it is also called. Theodore Graebner was one of the movement's leaders. Marquart points out: "There is just enough painful truth in the diagnosis of theological arthritis in the aging synodical bones, to make the new post-World War II direction seem like a wholly legitimate, indeed a much needed renewal."¹⁴ But it went too far, as he adds:

Denial of the old doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy came to be tolerated in the Missouri Synod largely because Lutheran union received top priority. Any doctrinal obstacles were perceived as dead weight to be cast overboard if Missouri's ecumenical balloon was to rise towards ALC-ULC-LCA fellowship, LWF membership, and beyond. But since it was not so easy to deny traditional doctrines in the Missouri Synod, ways and means were found to 're-interpret' them.¹⁵

One of the first public notices of historical-critical contagion in LCMS was from Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis prof 1949-53) in his work, "From Luther to Kierkegaard" (1950), published by LCMS' own Concordia Publishing House. In it he stated that the Lutheran Church has been steered wrong beginning with Chemnitz and the Formula of Concord. He urges Lutherans to follow Kant and Kierkegaard to the tune of: "Only that is true which is true for me."¹⁶ Pelikan even praises Schleiermacher, who is an arch-heretic in Pieper's "Christian Dogmatics." How that would have irked Pieper who became a professor at the St. Louis Seminary in 1878, its president in 1887 (replacing Walther), and president of LCMS from 1899-1911.

Student unrest over the doctrine of verbal inspiration came to a head already during the 1953-54 school year. I was surprised and glad to find that Robert Cordes, my wife's uncle, was one of the student leaders against false teaching who complained to the seminary president, Dr. Fuerbringer.¹⁷ Seminary professors there gave a series of presentations and discussions

trying to hold the line, but it was too late. The student journal, "Seminarian," in the years afterward continued to display obvious neo-orthodox ideas.

But it was another St. Louis seminary professor, Martin Scharlemann, who really brought the historical-critical dilemma to light. In an essay, "The Inerrancy of Scripture," Scharlemann questions the words of the "Brief Statement" (1932) which say that the Holy Scriptures "contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters." Scharlemann remarks:

I for one cannot bring myself to the point of believing that this sentence was explored in all of its dimensions before it was adopted. If it had been, I should think less of those who taught it than I want to. At the same time I entertain the hope that this sentence could not, in the wording quoted, pass this faculty today, or, if it did, that the terms 'truth,' 'error,' 'contradiction,' and 'historical' would receive some very careful and limiting definitions. For, as the statement reads, it is a pure rationalization, built on the assumption that our Scriptures are, like the Book of Mormon, a gift that fell straight from heaven, when in fact, it is the book of the people of God, with all that such a statement implies.¹⁸

"The Lutheran Quarterly" of August, 1959, contains an article by Martin Scharlemann entitled "God is One" in which he proposes an evolutionary picture of Israel's theology.¹⁹ On October 20-22, 1959, Scharlemann presented his paper, "Revelation and Inspiration" to the pastoral conference of the Western District of LCMS. Throughout the paper he spills forth such neo-orthodox, historical-critical ideas as: "The revelation did not consist

of some teaching or idea about Him, but rather of the very person of Christ."²⁰

"Revelation can only take place from subject to subject, from mind to mind; it consists of God unveiling His own thoughts of grace and judgment to the human mind. This takes place only in the relationship of one person to other persons."²¹ "Of and by themselves the great occurrences recorded in Scripture meant nothing much."²² "The best way to do that is to point out that this ancient notion of inspiration, the formal principle, which got into the church by way of the Greek apologists, brings with it a theory of inerrancy that is quite misleading and cannot be sustained from the Scriptures themselves."²³ On the final page of his paper (page A in the rear of this paper) he again undercuts inspiration and inerrancy, and the "Brief Statement" along with them.

Yet, in a statement to Pres. Fuerbringer, in which he continues to question the inerrancy of the Bible, Scharlemann protests: "Anything you may have read or heard to the effect that I have denied the doctrine of inerrancy is without foundation in fact." (See page B in back) And in a letter from Pres. Behnken addressed to all the pastors and teachers in synod, Scharlemann defends himself, saying his essays were only "exploratory." He takes offense at those who attacked him without getting in touch with him. He has the gall to claim: "I have at all times insisted on the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture." "I have personally always accepted and believed the doctrinal content of the 'Brief Statement.'" As for his views on inerrancy, Scharlemann is reported by Behnken to have "experienced a change of mind and heart." (See page C in rear)

As one can easily gather from quotes of Scharlemann two paragraphs previously, only by a great stretch of truth or definition can Scharlemann say he follows the doctrine of inspiration or the "Brief Statement." As

for his claim that his essays were only exploratory -- it is fine to explore false doctrine and prove fallacies, but Scharlemann was advocating the false teachings he was exploring. And finally, if Scharlemann has never done anything wrong, why does he need to experience "a change of mind and heart" on the subject of inerrancy?

In their April 13-22, 1960 meeting, the Texas District of LCMS asked for a repudiation of Scharlemann. And in a letter to the editor of "Lutheran Witness," Rev. Kurt Marquart, a pastor of the Texas District, stated that Scharlemann's denial of false teaching and use of the word "inerrancy" are simply cover-up and sophistry.²⁴ Pastors and laymen throughout LCMS were confused.

But men in St. Louis and elsewhere still defended Scharlemann. Their defense indicates that they also were being swallowed by the historical-critical method. In fact, since November 1, 1958 the St. Louis Curriculum Committee already included neo-orthodox statements in its annual report to the BHE.²⁵ The defense of Scharlemann by the St. Louis board of control and faculty, titled "The Form and Function of the Holy Scriptures," contains these neo-orthodox-tainted words: "The Scriptures express what God wants them to say and accomplish what God wants them to do. In this sense and in the fulfillment of this function they are inerrant, infallible, and wholly reliable."²⁶

Student unrest and similar circumstances to St. Louis happened at Valparaiso and Concordia River Forest, indicating the historical-critical method's growth there.²⁷ Again, I was glad to discover that one of the student protesters at River Forest was Robert Schollmeyer, who is now teaching in LCMS' St. Lorenz Lutheran grade school which I attended in my hometown of Frankenmuth, Michigan. But a quote calling Barth a conservative

"Einstein of theology" in the "Walther League Messenger" of 1959, the official youth magazine, shows that the historical-critical method was already penetrating the youth's thinking.²⁸

This was the state of LCMS at the time WELS severed fellowship with them in 1961. Of course, there were many people, although often unheard, who stood against false teaching. But as the "Confessional Lutheran" warned, this was an "invasion by Modernism that has infiltrated our St. Louis seminary and that now threatens to take over our whole Church!"²⁹ The historical-critical method's invasion was largely down-played until the Tietjen years at St. Louis when the Curriculum Committee made bold attempts to reshape the seminary's theological curriculum along neo-orthodox lines. Finally, on June 21, 1973, just prior to the New Orleans synodical convention, Dr. Roland Wiederaenders, then LCMS First Vice-president, wrote:

Despite repeated efforts we have not dealt honestly with our pastors and people. We have refused to state our changing theological position in open, honest, forthright, simple and clear words. Over and over again we said that nothing was changing when all the while we were aware of changes taking place.³⁰

LCMS appears to be on the verge of severing fellowship with ALC this summer. Since the trying years in the 50's, 60's, and 70's, many feel that LCMS has come a long way. But as we have seen, the historical-critical method made huge inroads into their synod, and before WELS can ever think about renewing fellowship with LCMS, a great deal of discussion and a crystal-clear agreement on the important doctrine of inspiration must take place, along with the disciplining of all false teachers.

not be Broken. But he adds that in the light of glory we'll see all this. In the meantime we are to bow before the authority of Scripture, he suggests. That is very sound advice, and not only when there are discrepancies!

These discrepancies cannot be explained away on the theory of textual corruption. As a matter of fact from all the complicated textual studies that have been made of Acts 7, one solid conclusion can be drawn: it is just these difficult statements that are closest to the original and have the best textual support. The explanation can be found in the fact that Stephen, as we are expressly told, grew up as a Hellenist, with a Greek-Jewish background. And in the Greek tradition, as we know from Philo and Josephus, God's call came to Abram in Ur; and he left Haran after Terah had died. Moreover, the LXX has the figure 75 for the number of people that come to Egypt with Jacob. In other words, Stephen was speaking, under the influence of the Spirit, mind you, on the basis of the information he had on these historical points. When all is said and done, Luther says, "I'll take my stand with Moses here; he knew more about the subject."

This is a pastoral matter for you and me. You have sent girls and boys to college, secular institutions. Before long you noticed that they had become almost agnostic. Now, if you have ever taken the time to analyze the reason for this, you will have found that in many cases the faith of such young people was upset when some teacher called their attention to such discrepancies. He may have asked a simple question, like, "From what mountain did Jesus ascend into heaven?" Then, if the student said, "The Mount of Olives", the teacher might read the end of Matthew, which unmistakably suggests that he ascended from a mountain in Galilee.

What I'm trying to say is this: If you have built the faith of your confirmands on a theory of inspiration which does not take into full account what the Scriptures actually say, you have dealt unfairly with that child. This is what Dr. Sasse was referring to with the sentence I read near the beginning of this paper, "How many souls has the Church not harmed with such doctrines in a way that can never be made good again!"

For this reason it ought to be obvious that the word "inerrant" can be and usually is a very misleading term to use of the Scriptures. It is dangerous because it is a word that makes sense only in the light of a false view of inspiration -- one that got into the Church from ancient paganism and has been perpetuated by the Reformed-Fundamentalist tradition.

Now, in a way, I suppose, it would be much more interesting to have a book unmarred by human limitations, a book so unique in its formal aspect that it was obviously different from every other book. But it just doesn't happen to be that way. It is the material in the Scriptures that make them unique. That's what makes the Bible inspired; it says what can only be said "in the Spirit." It testifies to the Christ. Every last syllable of it does. That is verbal inspiration; and that is what makes it the Word of God. Being the Word of God, the Bible does not need any extra props to support it by way of theories of inspiration and inerrancy. It is quite able to take care of itself, if we will just let it speak.

I want to add here two formulations. One is Lutheran; the other is Reformed. One follows from the formal, the other from the material principle. It has been said, "The Scriptures are the Word of God, and as such they are inspired." That is Lutheran. The other formulation has it, "The Bible is inspired; therefore it is the Word of God." That is Reformed Fundamentalism. Between these two statements is a great gulf fixed. Unhappily the Brief Statement is usually interpreted in the light of the second and formal principle. That is why the whole question of the Scriptures, particularly its inerrancy, needs a great deal of airing before we commit ourselves to a final formulation.

In Lutheran theology, faith comes first. That is what distinguishes our doctrine of inspiration from that of the Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Seventh Day Adventists--all of whom accept the formal principle of inspiration. They believe in the Bible as an inerrant book--and are lost! Their faith is in a book and not in Him to whom all the prophets and apostles bear witness.

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ST. LOUIS 5, MO.

ALFRED O. FUERBRINGER
PRESIDENT

February 11, 1960

To: The Clergy of The Lutheran Church--Missouri
Synod

From: Alfred O. Fuerbringer

Professor Soharlemann's Statement

1. I have always accepted and believed in the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture. I do so now without mental reservation and/or qualification of any kind.
2. I have never denied any doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. Instead, I have raised the question as to whether, in the light of the biblical evidence available to all of us, "inerrancy" is really the word we want to use in defining the truth and the utter reliability of the Sacred Scriptures. To be specific, I have defended the following propositions:

"Inerrancy" is a word which in modern times has become associated with the scientific method of investigation and related to factual precision.

b. In this modern sense it is, therefore, not synonymous with the Biblical concept of truth, which at times shows a strange in-difference to precision of fact.

c. Being a concept foreign to the Biblical writers, "inerrancy" tends strongly to mislead people into expecting something of Scripture which it often does not show. Therefore, the term ought not to be used; or, if it must be used, it should be carefully defined.

3. Whatever I have written and said in this area has never had any other purpose than to drive my fellow clergyman and myself back into the Scriptures, especially the inspired texts (Hebrew and Greek).

Anything you may have read or heard to the effect that I have denied the doctrine of inerrancy is without foundation in fact. I am happy to note this statement because the many statements that have been made of late, orally and in print, on this matter have tended to destroy confidence in the institution which I serve by divine call.

Martin A. Soharlemann
Martin A. Soharlemann

President Behnken's Letter

To all Pastors and Teachers of Synod
Dear Brethren in Christ:

You should have received these lines about a month sooner. I realize that pastors and teachers throughout Synod have been waiting for the information which this letter contains. Meetings, meetings, and more meetings prompt me to ask you to pardon me.

Dr. Martin H. Scharlemann, a member of our Seminary faculty in St. Louis, delivered two essays: "The Bible as Record, Witness and Medium of Revelation" (sic) and "Revelation and Inspiration." Dr. Scharlemann has told us repeatedly that he intended these essays to be of an exploratory nature only and were not to be construed as the last word on the subject under discussion.

However, the essays caused a great stir and disturbance in many hearts. Letters received clearly indicate that. Unfortunately, some resorted to all manner of attacks both orally and in print, as well as in so-called "open letters," without getting in touch with the essayist. Some of these attacks were directed even against the entire faculty, the Board of Control, and the *Praesidium* of Synod.

What are the facts? This matter has received proper attention, not in a legalistic but in a true evangelical manner. The executives and members of the faculty, the Seminary Board of Control, and the *Praesidium* of Synod have had thorough interviews with Dr. Scharlemann.

We herewith wish to report that we are grateful that Dr. Scharlemann, who stated, "As one feature of my exploratory essays, I made the suggestion that the term 'inerrancy' ought no longer to be used," has experienced a change of mind and heart. He assured us as well as the Board of Control: "From my correspondence, however, and from various discussions with pastoral conferences (notably on Easter Monday in St. Paul-Minneapolis), with the Seminary faculty, and with the *Praesidium*, I came to the conclusion that we must continue to use the word, because, among us, this term stands for the complete truthfulness and utter reliability of every word in Scripture. And I, for my person, want no part in any activity which would tend to destroy this view of the perfection and majesty of the Scriptures."

Dr. Scharlemann gave us also the following assurances: "I have at all times insisted on the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture. In fact, I have tried to point out that it is impossible to uphold and retain an ad-

quate view of the authority of the Bible without a dynamic doctrine of inspiration that applies to the Scriptures in all their parts. That is to say, I accept every word of Scripture as being fully inspired and therefore the word of God."

Furthermore, Dr. Scharlemann voluntarily assured us that he accepts the *Brief Statement*. He states: "I am fully aware of the fact that all of us teachers at synodical institutions have a very special responsibility to reflect the attitude and approach toward Scripture that is represented by this document. I have personally always accepted and believed the doctrinal content of the *Brief Statement*."

Brethren we are thankful that God led Dr. Scharlemann to speak as he did. We believe him. We feel convinced that he will teach and defend the position which our Synod has ever held about the divine inspiration, the infallibility and inerrancy and the unquestionable authority of Holy Writ. Our prayer is that God may graciously bless him and all our professors with deep loyalty to Holy Scriptures and our Lutheran Confessions, with ever-increasing determination to train future workers in Christ's kingdom who will be faithful and conscientious in preserving the precious heritage which God graciously entrusted to our beloved Synod.

I sincerely hope that the above information may put an end to the disturbance and to the many attacks mentioned above, and that it may lead us all to thank God that His truth has prevailed and to pray more earnestly and more fervently for our colleges and seminaries, our professors and students. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

Yours in Christ,

J. W. Behnken

1. Kurt E. Marquart, Anatomy of an Explosion, (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977), p. 4.
2. Marquart, p. 54.
3. Marquart, p. 5.
4. E. Clifford Nelson, The Lutherans in North America, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 381.
5. Nelson, p. 383.
6. Nelson, p. 386.
7. Marquart, p. 113.
8. " p. 105.
9. " p. 105.
10. " p. 101.
11. " p. 101.
12. " p. 103.
13. " p. 49.
14. " p. 3.
15. " p. 5.
16. " p. 108.
17. State of the Church, Book of Documentation, 1961, p. 81.
18. " p. 3.
19. " pp. 10-13.
20. " p. 20.
21. " p. 21.
22. " p. 22.
23. " p. 28.
24. " p. 36.
25. Marquart, p. 110.
26. State of the Church, p. 39.
27. " pp. 85, 119.
28. Marquart, p. 110.
29. State of the Church, p. 42.
30. Board of Control, Exodus From Concordia, (St. Louis: Concordia College, 1977), Preface.

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