

By Grace – Confessional In Practice

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“By the grace of God I am what I am; and his grace, which was bestowed upon me, was not in vain, but I labored more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Cor 15:10). Paul had to marvel at what God had made of him. He was an apostle. Not that he had deserved this. “I am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor 15:9). It was the grace of God that made him what he was. But that does not mean that Paul was inactive. “I labored more abundantly than they all,” he could say. And yet, everything he did was still the grace of God working in him.

By Grace - Confessional in Practice. Our theme leads us to speak of what the church has done. Practice speaks of the activity, of the actions of the church, of its people, its presidents, pastors, professors, teachers, and members. If there is anything right that the Wisconsin Synod has done, or is doing, this is by the grace of God.

The Wisconsin Synod's early beginnings did not hold out the hope that a church that would be confessional in practice was being born. Our history is not one grand march in confessional practice. By the grace of God our church became as confessional in practice as it is.

Practice concerns itself with actions. We will have to speak of what people did. In doing so, we must, however, be on our guard against glorying in men and crediting them with making the church what it is. While we acknowledge the abundant labors, the gifts and sacrifices, of the leaders, the pastors, the people that served the church, we must see them as gifts of our God. We must see their gifts as coming from God. What hast thou that thou didst not receive? This question, first addressed by Paul to the Corinthian congregation, applies equally to the Wisconsin Synod.

In fact, whether we look at our failings, or whether we look at the right things men did in our history, both lead us to marvel at the grace of God. Our failings, weaknesses, and sins lead us to see how completely undeserved the grace of God is. Whatever happened that was right, whatever men of faith served the Synod faithfully, causes us to acknowledge the bounty of God's goodness. Indeed, Grace stands written unmistakably over the history of the Wisconsin Synod. How evident this becomes as we see God leading our Synod to confessionalism, and to express its confessionalism in its practice: The latter is the concern of the third paper at this convention.

But what is confessional practice? What are its characteristics? It will be helpful to review these questions before we examine some of our practices in history. That will give us a basis for evaluation.

What is confessional practice? It is a practice in which the actions, the ministrations, the established policies of the church correspond to its confession. Confessionally we as Lutherans subscribe to the Scriptures as God's infallible Word, as the only norm for faith and life. We subscribe to our Lutheran Confessions as true expositions of that Word. Confessional practice will faithfully put that confessional position into practice in the church's life. Simply stated, confessional practice means that the church practices what it preaches.

But what are the characteristics of confessional practice? These can be summed up under two words: evangelical and firm.

Evangelical and firm - these two are sometimes falsely viewed as mutually exclusive. Evangelical practice may be thought of as displaying a loving and yielding spirit. A firm practice, by contrast, is equated with legalism. Such a confusion results in a practice that is neither evangelical nor firm. These two do not contradict one another. Let us explore the significance of each.

The word evangelical needs no explanation. Evangelical practice is one in which the gospel finds full application. However, we must say more than that. Evangelical practice results when all of Scripture finds full application, both the law and the gospel. It would be wrong to think that evangelical refers simply to the application of the gospel, and firmness has to do with applying the law. Rather, both, the law and the gospel, are used in evangelical practice, but each according to the use God intended for it. All of Scripture centers in Christ

and has the purpose of leading sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus the Savior, and to the life of faith. This is evangelical practice.

The specific purpose of the gospel is clear from Scripture. It is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes (Ro 1:16). The gospel, and it alone, works faith in the forgiveness wrought by Christ. Evangelical practice has as its deepest concern that men may be made wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. To that end the gospel must be used.

But in the church's practice we are involved especially with what is done. We must remember that only the gospel provides the motivation and power towards actions that accord with the will of God. The gospel works faith which grafts us as branches into Christ the vine. He gives strength for bearing fruit. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Php 4:13). Evangelical practice recognizes that the gospel alone works faith and gives the motivation, will, and strength for Christian, God-pleasing action. The church's practice, to be evangelical, will use the gospel for its intended purpose.

But what about the law? Evangelical practice will result only when also the law is used for its intended purpose. Not simply the use of the law is legalism, but a misuse of both it and the gospel. The proper use of the law is still very much a part of evangelical practice.

"By the law is the knowledge of sin" (Ro 3:20). This function of the law is essential for effective application of, the gospel. Jesus Himself said: "They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Lk 5:31,32). This function of the law, as a mirror, is well known among us. We recognize its scriptural basis.

Evangelical practice, however, concerns itself particularly with actions, thus with sanctification. Does the law have any part here? If Christians were perfectly renewed the answer would be No. But that is not the case. They are both new man and old Adam. The new man, motivated by the gospel, will want to serve God in true holiness. But the old Adam is still there, misguiding the Christian. So the Christian needs instruction as to what the will of God for him in his life and conduct is. Jesus recognized this and presented the Sermon on the Mount to His disciples. Paul recognized this and in his letters instructed his readers in Christian living. We as Christians need such an infallible guide lest we mistakenly believe that we serve God in ways devised by man's natural inclinations.

Evangelical practice is concerned that the gospel motivation lead to works that are pleasing to God, not simply to self-chosen acts of seeming piety. Thus Christians need the law in its so-called third use "to give them a definite rule according to which they should pattern and regulate their entire life."¹ When this is not done, when a vague law of love is to direct the Christian to do what is right, a situation ethic results that frequently finds more direction from man's sinful flesh than from the unchangeable will of God. To say that evangelical practice is not to use the law as a guide, in this third use, is itself unevangelical.

Finally, the law serves as a curb, coercing the unwilling flesh of man into obedience. In some respects the law in this function does not apply to the Christian at all. It has nothing to do with the Christian in so far as he is a new man in Christ. "The law is not made for a righteous man but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners," etc. (1 Tm 1:9).

Thus the law as a curb does not effect Christian sanctification. Fruits of the Spirit are not produced by the threats and coercion of the law. We read in the Epitome: "Concerning the distinction between works of the law and fruits of the Spirit we believe, teach, and confess that works done according to the law are, and are called, works of the law as long as they are extorted from people only under the coercion of punishments and the threat of God's wrath."²

The church needs to realize that if the law has been used simply to effect obedience to the church and its regulations or simply to give the church an appearance of outward purity, it has produced nothing but law works. The church is not to be satisfied merely with effecting obedience or conformity by laying down the law,

¹ *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), .pp 479f.

² Tappert, p 480.

but it aims at Christian sanctification. It will guard against using the law to extort from unwilling hearts what the gospel has not spontaneously produced.

One further note in this connection. In discussing the intended purpose of the law we can speak of the three uses separately. We realize, however, that in practice the same law spoken to the Christian reveals his sin, gives him a rule according to which to pattern his Christian life, and curbs his old Adam. While one use may receive special emphasis in a particular situation, such emphasis does not exclude the other uses.

All of this and much more is included when we say that confessional practice is evangelical. While the word “evangelical” directs our attention directly to the gospel, and practice is never evangelical without the gospel, evangelical practice will use the whole of God’s Word according to its intended purpose. This includes the law, for the law has important functions to perform in the interest of the gospel. In fact, if the law were to be eliminated, the gospel too would be lost as something meaningless. Thus evangelical practice calls for the proper use, the proper distinction, the proper correlation of both law and gospel.

The other characteristic of confessional practice is that it is firm. To be firm in practice simply means to take the gospel, and for the sake of the gospel the whole of God’s Word seriously. It means that one recognizes that we are bound by God’s Word in what we do. And the gospel should work that firmness in us, for it is the message of God’s grace, of His forgiving love in Christ through which we have salvation. After St. Paul had proclaimed the gospel of Jesus’ resurrection and its blessed fruits, he admonished his readers: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor 15:58). To be firm thus means not to deal lightly with Holy Scripture.

Firmness furthermore involves consistency. To be firm is not to act one way once and another way at another time. What God says in His Word does not change. To be firm means to follow it without changing. This must be properly understood, however, lest it lead again to legalistic, and thus to unevangelical, practice.

Consistency is not equivalent to a mechanical application of the principles of God’s Word in practice. Consistency recognizes that the principle is not putty, that can be molded to fit the circumstances. Nevertheless, consistency will need to take into account that the way the principle is applied will vary according to the circumstances that confront one. St. Paul was vitally concerned that the principle that circumcision, which God had commanded for the Israelites in the Old Testament, must not be considered in the New Testament times as necessary for salvation. Consistent with this principle, Paul had not circumcised Titus, a Greek, when he became a Christian and a pastor. When Paul took him along to Jerusalem, he would not yield to any demands by false brethren to have him circumcised. “But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised,” Paul wrote to the Galatians (2:3). On the other hand, when Timothy, the son of a mixed marriage, who had not been circumcised, joined Paul as a coworker at Lystra, we are told that Paul “took and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those quarters; for they all knew that his father was a Greek” (Ac 16:3). Was Paul inconsistent? Or did he change the principle? Not at all. The principle remained the same, but its application took into account the differing circumstances in the two cases. Mechanically to follow a given practice, in other words, never again to circumcise anyone because it no longer was required and could be misused legalistically, would itself also have been legalistic.

To be firm thus is to let the principle stand unchanged, but to examine carefully how this principle needs to be applied in the circumstances that confront one.

Firm practice also includes the ability to apply confessional principles consistently to new problems as they arise. The church is not always faced with the same problems. Failure to apply the right biblical truths to the new problems means that the principle is no longer firmly put into practice.

Confessional practice thus has these two characteristics. It is evangelical. It is firm. Both are part of it. To be evangelical without being firm is not enough. It may lead to playing games with God’s Word. To be firm without being evangelical, on the other hand, is pure legalism. These two characteristics, rather than being mutually exclusive, need to remain together. Thus confessional practice results.

Let us now proceed to examine the practice in the Wisconsin Synod at various times in its history in the light of what we believe to be confessional practice according to Scripture.

When the Wisconsin Synod came into being, the founders were intent on its becoming a truly Lutheran church body. On December 8, 1849, the three pastors, Muehlhaeuser, Weinmann, and Wrede, met to organize what they called “Die erste deutsch evang.-luth. Synode von Wisconsin.” (The first German evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin.) The constitution that was adopted at its first meeting the following year required that at his ordination every candidate for the ministry was to pledge himself to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and the rest of the Evangelical Lutheran Confessions as containing essentially and correctly the fundamental doctrines of Holy Writ, and to teach accordingly.³

The practice in the congregations was to correspond to this confessional position. The constitution said: “Every preacher may organize affairs in his congregations by consultation with the church council as is most profitable for the congregation. But everything should be in keeping with the true Word of the Bible and the confessions of our Evangelical-Lutheran church. Accordingly, all liturgical acts in our congregations shall be performed according to the book of agenda introduced among us.”⁴ They bound themselves in their practice to Scripture and the confessions. In other matters there was to be Christian liberty. The constitution showed this new synod’s intention to be Lutheran in doctrine and practice.

The founding pastors showed a deep concern for the spiritual welfare of the people. They evidenced a love for the gospel and a deep interest in God’s Word. The minutes of the first synodical meeting report that it was “resolved that every preacher belonging to the body devote himself especially to the youth and conduct a day school, Bible and mission classes.”⁵ We are told that “the last point of discussion dealt with the neglect of home worship in many families and all the preachers accordingly were cautioned to see to it that in our congregations the home and family altar be maintained.”⁶ These concerns of the first synod meeting reflect the kind of man who had been elected the first president. While the confessional position the Synod adopted may have resulted more from the insistence of other men, what Muehlhaeuser represented, as Koehler puts it in his *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, “was no less great, a personal living faith, childlike trust in his Savior, and a burning zeal to build His kingdom and spend himself in the work.”⁷ A man who displayed a kind, evangelical spirit, devoted to the Bible and intent on practicing his Christianity and spreading the gospel was at the helm of the Wisconsin Synod during its first ten years. The ingredients for an evangelical practice that wanted to be confessionally Lutheran were at hand.

But the question was: what is true practice according to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions? What was to be done in the various situations, and many of them new and different, with which they were confronted? The training the pastors in the first decade or two had received, the background out of which they came, did not prepare them to answer such questions readily.

Muehlhaeuser, Weinmann, and Wrede had been sent to America by the Langenberg Mission Society in Germany. This had as its special concern to train and send men to serve the protestant German emigrants to America. The members of this society and of the others with which it was working in close cooperation like the Baseler and the Berlin Missionsgesellschaft, were made up of Lutherans, Reformed, and the so-called United, people who were devoted to the preservation of the gospel and the fundamental truths of salvation but who saw no difficulty in joint worship and even joint communion among all the evangelicals or protestants. While these men who were trained for these societies at the school at Barmen gained a certain Lutheran consciousness, they were not trained to carry out a definitely Lutheran practice. Thus many of the early pastors of our Synod came out of an environment that was unionistic. They were expected to carry out that kind of practice. The men trained by these societies in their mission seminaries were expected to serve in America according to the broad view of their German supporters, and this was to serve all German protestants in America.

Soon also pastors who had studied at the German universities arrived in America and some of them found their way into our Synod. They had received a more scholarly training which, however, failed to give

³ Wisconsin Proceedings, 1850, p 9.

⁴ Wisconsin Proceedings, 1850, p 6.

⁵ Wisconsin Proceedings, 1850, p 2.

⁶ Wisconsin Proceedings, 1850, p 2.

⁷ J. P. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (St. Cloud, Minn.: Sentinel Publishing Company, 1970 , p 72.

them an understanding for the practical work of the ministry. Whatever by way of practical training they received was aimed at the state church situation in Germany. Koehler comments: "Here in America a new pastoral theology had to be born."⁸

Not only did the founders and early pastors in the Wisconsin Synod fail to receive a training that would lead to confessional Lutheran practice, but they brought with them a definite dislike for the stricter practice that was carried out by the so-called Old-Lutherans, which referred in America primarily to the Missouri Synod. When a pastor Weitbrecht and his wife turned from the Synod to become a Methodist, he wrote: "Your practice is neither strictly Lutheran nor strictly Evangelical, and yet you aim to be both." President Muehlhaeuser answered in 1853: "Just because I am not strictly (Lutheran) or Old-Lutheran, I am in a position to offer every child of God and servant of Christ the hand of fellowship over the ecclesiastical fence. Have quite often been together with English preachers of the various denominations in ministerial conference, and we respected and loved each other as brethren and deliberated on the general welfare of the church."⁹ These early men brought with them a strong dislike for the strict practice of the Old-Lutherans.

The practical problems that faced these men, if they were to become a truly Lutheran body, centered around unionism. The congregations often consisted of both Lutheran and Reformed members, and the pastors were to serve both. It was a United congregation at Granville that had called Wrede. When Goldammer went to Manitowoc, the congregation was supported also by some strict Reformed, who, however, did not receive Holy Communion. At the same time Goldammer served a Reformed congregation in Newton. This was the way it was expected by the German mission societies.

There was also the question of the kind of books to be used in worship and in the instruction of the young. The first constitution had declared that "all liturgical acts in our congregations shall be performed according to the book of agenda introduced among us."¹⁰ It isn't clear which book of agenda is meant. From the East some of these men had brought along the Pennsylvania Agenda, which is described as rationalizing and unionistic. This is an area that received early attention, when already in 1855 President Muehlhaeuser encouraged the production of an agenda by the Synod.

Some congregations used a union catechism. This, too, came in for strong opposition when such practice was discovered. We shall hear more of this later.

A poor practice with unionistic implications was evident also in the collection of funds to support the building of churches. When in 1850 Grace church of Milwaukee had the opportunity to purchase a church building, Muehlhaeuser traveled to the East to collect funds. An article in the Boston Puritan Recorder strongly encouraged contributions, stating that a number of Germans of recent immigration hither, that can sympathize in our views of religion, and cooperate with us in the spread of vital godliness among their own countrymen, is exceedingly small."¹¹ The following year Weinmann collected \$2000 in the East to build a church in Racine. Later the collection of funds in Germany to build a seminary and college was the source of difficulty that occasioned some severe strictures from the Old-Lutherans in America.

In the first decade of its existence the Wisconsin Synod thus presented the picture of a body that wanted to be considered Lutheran, that aimed at a practice in accord with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, in which, however, the training and background of its pastors resulted in widespread unionistic practices. We cannot but appreciate their evangelical approach, but recognize the lack of firmness, their failure to apply sound scriptural principles consistently and firmly to the problems that faced them. All the characteristics of confessional practice were not as yet there.

But as the Synod grew, pastors arrived among whom, were men who in the next decade and beyond provided the leadership that added firmness to the practice. Names like Bading, Koehler, Reim, and especially Hoenecke come to mind. Although Muehlhaeuser may not have fully shared the new direction into which the Synod was turning, he did not seek to prevent it nor oppose the men who provided the leadership after 1860. In

⁸ Koehler, p 65.

⁹ Koehler, p 43.

¹⁰ Wisconsin Proceedings, 1850, p 6.

¹¹ Koehler, p 42.

that year he asked to be relieved of the presidency, and Bading became the new president. The following year two papers were presented at the Synod convention, one by Reim on the Synod's confessional status, another by Fachtmann on the practice of private confession, dealing with a practical problem that had arisen in a case that involved the Missouri Synod congregation in Lebanon. This shows the Synod's concern to be considered Lutheran in its practice. But more than words were necessary. Actions taken against congregations that followed unionistic practices in 1862 showed the serious intent of the Synod to pursue a confessional course in its practice.

As we look at the 1860's, our Synod was faced with an intense struggle, the outcome of which would determine whether its practice would show it to be truly confessional or whether it would continue a unionistic practice that could only lead away from confessional Lutheranism. Directly involved in this was the founding of its seminary and college. An important aspect of building a Wisconsin Synod seminary was President Bading's collection in Germany. The Synod experienced pressures, criticism, strictures, pulling it in two directions, on the one hand by the Missouri Synod, on the other, by the German mission societies. When the dust had settled, the Wisconsin Synod found itself in fellowship with the Old-Lutheran Missourians, intent on following a confessional practice that was both evangelical and firm. From the viewpoint of confessional practice, the decade of the 1860's was most significant. A brief review of some of the events will reveal how completely the end result was the working of God's grace.

When in 1862 the question was raised whether the Wisconsin Synod might attempt to have its pastors trained at the seminaries of the Missouri and Iowa Synods, an answer given was that "our Synod not at all approves of the exclusive trend of those two synods and hence could not have its future members imbued with such a spirit."¹² In 1863 President Bading in his opening message expressed the aim of the Synod in these terms: "She has made it her aim to avoid polemics against other Lutheran church bodies. . .The goal that has been set before us Christians. . .is not to take part in confessional controversies, that are started, carried on, and continued outside of our synodical confines. . .but rather to build the kingdom of God."¹³ Wisconsin still had to learn, and this included its conservatively Lutheran president, that you cannot follow a firm confessional practice without becoming involved in polemics.

The exclusive spirit of Missouri referred to was felt by Wisconsin in the severe criticism of Wisconsin that appeared in Missouri Synod publications. In 1862 the Missouri Synod Lutheraner wrote: "But we cannot recognize the same (Wisconsin Synod as a genuine Lutheran synod. It is rather a synod to which, in spite of all its pluming itself with the Lutheran confessions, we must very firmly proclaim that significant saying of Luther's: You have another spirit than we. . .(a synod) that more and more, sometimes under cover, sometimes openly exercised its syncretistic (uniting different creeds), hence unionistic nature."¹⁴ Similar criticism continued throughout the greater part of the 60's until it tapered off rather abruptly in 1868. Causes for the criticism sometimes were problems that arose between Missouri and Wisconsin congregations, but particularly also the Wisconsin Synod's continued relationship with the unionistic German mission societies. How much this criticism contributed toward Wisconsin's turn to a firm confessional practice is a matter of conjecture. This much must be said. If there had not been men in the Wisconsin Synod who themselves wanted to pursue a firm confessional practice, the criticism of Missouri might have created only resentment, especially since some of it was based on incomplete knowledge of the facts. Yet, to deny its impact would be saying too much.

During the 60's, the Langenberg and Berlin mission societies on their part made concerted attempts to prevent Wisconsin from deserting its milder practice. In 1863 a letter from Berlin demanded of the Synod a declaration that it would not forbid its pastors temporarily to supply union congregations with Word and Sacrament when the need in an individual case required this. It also called for a little damper to be placed on the pro-Missouri spirit that was noticeably astir in the Wisconsin Synod, in favor of a mild evangelical Lutheranism. The following year the Langenberg society in a letter to Bading expressed the fear that the Wisconsin Synod was, more and more abandoning its former milder practice over against the Reformed and the

¹² Koehler, p 84.

¹³ Wisconsin Proceedings, 1863, pp 6f.

¹⁴ Koehler, p 86.

United in order to maintain an exclusively Lutheran stand and warned that this would necessitate a change in the relation to their United society. They were disturbed among other things by the strong stand the Synod took in 1863 against the use of the union catechism in several of the Synod's congregations, it allowing only six months for the pastor to rectify the situation. They pointed out that the Synod had accepted these congregations without the requirement that they use Luther's Catechism.

Since the Synod sought to justify its growing confessional practice as well as its continued relationship to the Langenberg and Berlin societies, the latter felt more and more that there was a lack of complete openness and frankness in the Wisconsin relationship to them. When in 1867 the Synod at its convention took a definite stand against man-made union in the church, such as obtained in the German Union, the Langenberg society in December wrote: "But is that acting aboveboard, dear brother, your Synod's informing us of such resolutions that so vitally affect our work by merely sending us the minutes?"¹⁵ It became evident and was soon also expressed that if the Synod continued on its present course of a confessional practice, support in the form of men and money for the seminary would be withheld. As one reads this history in greater detail, one cannot avoid the distinct impression that there was an attempt on the part of the Synod to retain the support of the German societies while condemning their unionistic practices. It took a while for the inconsistency of this to be recognized. The financial support of Germany for the building of our seminary just alluded to was sought through a direct effort by President Bading. In the summer of 1863 he left for Germany to collect funds for the seminary. This could well become a temptation to slow down the Wisconsin Synod anti-unionistic practice. Some of the Synod's actions in the first half of the 60's required explanation both by President Bading personally and through written communication from other synodical officers to allay the fears of the Langenberg and Berlin Societies.

These explanations were not, however, to the satisfaction of all in the Synod. Pastor Philip Koehler, as secretary of the Synod, was asked to sign one such letter to the Prussian Supreme Church Council. He refused for conscience reasons pointing out that "it is stated clearly several times that we are ready to serve United and Reformed congregations as such, whereas our constitution and the congregational code likewise require that the congregations belonging to us be of the true Lutheran confession, hence no longer United or Reformed, but Lutheran."¹⁶ He did not want to appear, he said, as a semi-unionist, but as a bona-fide Lutheran. The collection for the seminary among Union churches in Germany did pose dangers to the Synod in its move toward a more consistent confessional practice. It was the Langenberg and Berlin societies who on their part stopped sending the income from the collection for the seminary to the Wisconsin Synod after its 1867 resolutions opposing man-made union such as the union in Prussia.

One other development of the 1860's needs consideration as we observe the growing confessionalism in the practice of the Wisconsin Synod. In 1866 the Wisconsin Synod participated in the formation of the General Council, which gave promise of bringing together those Lutherans who wanted to be truly confessional. In the East, the Pennsylvania Synod, with which the Wisconsin Synod had continued a close relationship, receiving financial assistance regularly for the support of its pastors, provided leadership and even the Old Lutheran synods like Missouri, Ohio, and Iowa were showing interest in this new organization. But very soon doubts arose about the stand this new body would take on several points of doctrine and practice. The Wisconsin Synod called upon the Council to take a firm position against the unionistic practice of pulpit and altar fellowship with non-Lutherans and called for a clear position against lodges.

In 1868 this firming up of the Wisconsin Synod practice took a major step. The convention of that year was significant and in some respects climactic. For the first time Pastor Muehlhaeuser, the beloved founder and father of the synod, was not present. The Lord had removed him from the church militant in the fall of 1867. In his presidential address Bading paid tribute to the deep love for souls, the ardent concern for the spread of the gospel of the man who had provided leadership and stamped his imprint on the Synod during its early years so that it sometimes was simply called the Muehlhaeuser synod.

¹⁵ Koehler, p 113.

¹⁶ Koehler, p 95.

What was significant about this presidential address however, was its clear call for a consistent, unambiguous Lutheran practice. He made a frank and open admission that the Synod's relationship to the union societies of the Prussian state church prevented it from expressing its inward confessionalism as clearly and openly as it should, that some of the criticism voiced against the Synod was justified. This vacillation, he said with great earnestness, must come to an end. The time had come to speak out clearly against a union that disregarded doctrinal differences as insignificant. After a lengthy debate the convention passed a resolution rejecting as contrary to the doctrine and practice of the Lutheran church any and every pulpit and altar fellowship with false teachers, with such who have a different faith. Four pastors voted against the resolution. One was the secretary of the Synod, who on the next day asked for his release from the Synod. Another was Prof. Martin, president of the college, who also soon left the college and the Synod. One of the four later withdrew his negative vote.

Consistent with this resolution the Synod stated that unless the General Council at its next session expressed itself clearly in agreement with this position, its membership should be considered terminated. Since at its next meeting the Council failed to take the desired position, the resolution went into effect in 1869.

Regarding the Langenberg and Berlin societies, who as a result of the 1867 anti-union resolutions had declared a break with the Wisconsin Synod, should it hold to this position, the Synod recognized the correctness of this action while extending its thanks to them for their past help.¹⁷ Thus the relationship of the Synod with these societies was coming to a conclusion.

At the same time, Wisconsin and Missouri were drawing closer together. The convention stated that it knew of no divisive doctrinal difference between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods and called on the president to take the necessary steps to arrive at peace and a brotherly relationship between the members of the two bodies on the basis of true teaching.¹⁸ This action led to a colloquy between representatives of the two bodies later in the year and a declaration in the 1869 convention, in this way a fellowship was established that was to continue for over ninety years.

Thus by the end of its second decade the Wisconsin Synod had arrived at a practice that was both evangelical and firm, a practice which corresponded to its stated acceptance of the inspired Scriptures and of the Lutheran Confessions. The Synod had brought its own practice into line with what it expected of its pastors and congregations. When we consider the background and training of the men that to a great extent formed the Wisconsin Synod, when we see the close bonds that tied the Synod in its early years to the unionistic German mission societies and to some of the more liberal eastern synods in the United States, when we recognize the importance of the support that was received by the Synod from these groups, when we see the manner in which the Synod was criticized by the Old-Lutherans, sometimes unjustly, when we see its vacillation especially in regard to unionistic practices, then we cannot but say: it was the pure grace of God that led the course of the Synod, that gave it the necessary leaders, that guided these leaders so that by 1870 it was a church body that was acknowledged by true Lutherans to be confessional both in doctrine and practice. It was only by the grace of God that it had become what it was.

More than a century has passed since 1870. We shall be able to give consideration to this period only briefly. We have devoted a greater portion of our time to the first 20 years because they were so crucial. The direction the Synod took during those years became determinative in many respects for the rest of its history. At the same time, it can never be assumed that once a synod arrives at confessional practice, it will continue in it. Never dare a church become complacent, thinking that it has arrived at a position that cannot again be perverted or lost.

In 1878 our Synod reopened its seminary after sending its students for the previous eight years in an exchange arrangement to the St. Louis seminary. Now an increasing number of the pastors that entered its ministry was trained by the Synod itself. The practice of its pastors to a great extent was determined by the training they received at our Seminary. Especially five men can be named who provided leadership in the

¹⁷ Wisconsin Proceedings, 1868, p 26.

¹⁸ Wisconsin Proceedings, 1868, p 28.

training of our pastors during this next century. To mention them in particular is not to discount the work done by many others and also the leadership provided by the Synod presidents. But these five appear to have been special gifts of God's grace through whom the Lord preserved our Synod confessional in doctrine and practice. Their unusual gifts and their comparatively long tenure of service make their contribution to the life of our Synod especially significant.

Prof. Adolph Hoenecke, who had served the Seminary in its early years from 1866-1870, was called back when it was again opened in 1878. He remained in that position, working for 30 years especially in the fields of dogmatics and homiletics. Only a sound doctrinal training can form the basis for a truly confessional practice. His four-volume *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik*, published after his death, shows the thoroughness of the doctrinal training our students were receiving. His published sermons reveal his homiletical skill, and preaching is one of the most important practical aspects of the ministry.

In 1900 Hoenecke was joined on the faculty by J. P. Koehler and in 1902 by August Pieper. The former served until 1929, the latter until 1946. These men, gifted in many directions, are both remembered for their work in the field of exegesis, of interpreting Scripture. The importance of this for a sound practice is only too evident. Scripture must first be properly expounded if it is to be applied correctly in practice. Prof. Koehler also excelled in the field of church history and impressed on our men the importance of this study for an intelligent ministry.

This triumvirate of professors in 1904 began the publication of our Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, giving it at that time the German name, *Theologische Quartalschrift*. Through it their influence on the manner in which our pastors carried out their ministry continued beyond the three student years.

When Prof. Hoenecke died in 1908, Prof. John Schaller succeeded him as professor in dogmatics. However, we remember him in this connection particularly for his work in the field of pastoral theology. In 1913 he published his *Pastorale-Praxis*, a textbook for training our students in the practical aspects of the ministry.

Finally we take note of the many years Prof. John Meyer taught at our Seminary, from 1920 to the time of his death in 1964. While his major assignment during those years was in the field of dogmatics, he at various times was called on to teach many of the other subjects, including biblical interpretation of both the Old and New Testaments. We see him as a man who helped preserve the confessionalism that had developed under the leadership of the earlier men.

Perhaps the greatest danger that faces a synod when it arrives at a firm practice, as did our Synod in 1870, is that of becoming legalistic. There is the danger that a firm practice is stressed and carried out in such a way that it no longer remains evangelical. This happens when a firm practice is followed in a certain area over a period of time. Soon the course of action becomes traditional and the evangelical basis for it is lost sight of. The interest in carrying out sound practice may shift from interest in immortal souls to interest in having "clean" congregations. And there is always the danger that the firmness and strictness of the practice may go beyond what Scripture itself requires. Such a practice adds man's law to what God's Word says. That too is legalism.

Some comments made by Schaller in 1913 in the Preface to his book on pastoral theology reveal something about the course of pastoral practice in the Synod and the thinking of the men who were teaching it to our ministerial students. He pointed out that the great teachers of Lutheran theology in the 17th century were considered as leaders whom one could safely follow in the field of dogmatics. The result was that this judgment was also carried over to their presentation of pastoral ethics. It was taken for granted that they must be reliable teachers in the field of pastoral ethics also, and so we followed them almost blindly. Frequently, he says, we overlooked the fact that these great teachers had a basically false view of the relationship between church and state. This influenced what they said about a pastor's duties and rights. We failed to notice the uncommonly legalistic manner that was so predominant among them. We did not realize that the pastoral office would have to be carried out quite differently in a church free from the state than under state church conditions.

This reliance on the 17th century theologians in pastoral practice, Schaller pointed out, led either to actions that at times were rather legalistic, or to a restless conscience when it was realized that the ideals they set up could not be carried out. At other times there was the happy inconsistency that someone upheld their

theory and did not notice that in practice he was not really following them. The result was often unclarity which sometimes resulted in one pastor accusing another of false practice, and no real understanding could be arrived at.¹⁹

We see how concerned Schaller was lest our practice become legalistic. We are also reminded of Koehler's comment that a new pastoral theology had to be developed among us. Schaller for that reason avoided quoting from these venerated 17th century fathers. He rather chose to establish the Scriptural principles and then to apply them to the new circumstances that faced our pastors. Thus his pastoral theology breathed a truly evangelical spirit while it firmly applied the truths of Scripture to whatever practical problems confronted the church.

This concern to retain a practice that was both evangelical and firm, that would not lose its evangelical characteristic by legalism was a trademark also of both Koehler and Pieper. An example of this we have when they wrote of the church's practice in regard to lodge membership.

Very early in our history, our congregations were faced with the question of what to do about members who joined a lodge. Already in 1858 the congregation at Manitowoc joined its pastor in his stand against membership in a German lodge, the *Hermanssoehne*. In 1864 the congregation at Watertown was involved in a major conflict about the lodge. By 1867 the Synod expressed itself against retaining lodge members in its congregations. Failure on the part of the General Council to take a firm stand against the lodge was one of the four points that contributed to the Synod's decision against continued membership in that body.

However, it would seem that the practice in the congregations was not always as firm as one might have expected. Between 1910 and 1912 Prof. Koehler published a lengthy article in the *Quartalschrift* entitled "How do we properly attack lodgery?" (*Wie greifen wir das Logenwesen recht an?*)²⁰ He deplored the fact that some congregations still vacillated in their position toward the lodge, yes, even here and there a pastor. What complicated following a consistent practice was that new lodges were being organized and the church had to learn to apply the basic principles to the new situations. In this article he was concerned to warn against legalistic practice in dealing with this problem. He warned that in an effort to attain uniform practice we might set up a set of rules for dealing with the problem. Soon such rules would be followed without understanding the reasons for them. They would be carried out, often mechanically, and the result would be that one could boast of having a congregation free of lodge members, but the real concern for souls, in effect the gospel, has been lost.

Koehler also warned against superficiality in attacking the evils of lodgery. One might get hung up on externals, on its secretiveness, its rituals, oath, and the like and fail to see the lodge's basic opposition to the very heart of the gospel. Koehler's oft-repeated warnings against a formalistic, traditionalistic, externalistic, legalistic practice find meaningful expression in this article. He did not oppose firmness by any means, but it was to be a product of the gospel that always aims at the salvation of the individual. He called for a practice that was both evangelical and firm, a practice rooted in a deep commitment to the gospel.

A decade and a half later Prof. Pieper published an article in the *Quartalschrift* which had this thesis as its theme: "That lodge brothers are not to be admitted to the Sacrament under any circumstances." (*Dasz Logenbrueder unter gar keinen Umstaenden zum Sakrament zuzulassen seien.*)²¹ The theme expresses the firm approach to lodge practice of Prof. Pieper. Perhaps a continuing laxness on the part of some pastors and congregations led to this firm approach in the theme, possibly it reveals something about the different natures of Pieper and Koehler. But the firmness of Pieper is not to be construed as conflicting with the gospel. On the contrary, he calls for a firm practice for the sake of the spiritual good of the person involved in lodgery and to avoid offense, which is destructive of faith. He stresses that this firm practice must be carried out in a truly evangelical manner. It is tyranny to turn a lodge member away from the sacrament without explaining to the

¹⁹ J. Schaller, *Pastorale Praxis in der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche Amerikas* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1913), *Vorwort*, pp IIIff.

²⁰ J. P. Koehler, "Wie greifen wir das Logenwesen recht an?," *Theologische Quartalschrift* (Oct. 1910), VII, 242-260; (April 1911), VIII, 53-81; (April 1912), IX, 106-131.

²¹ August Pieper, "Dasz Logenbrueder unter gar keinen Umstaenden zum Sakrament zuzulassen seien," *Theologische Quartalschrift* (Jan. 1927), XXIV, 60-83.

person the biblical basis for this, or by referring simply to a provision of the congregation's constitution or to a regulation of the Synod. The manner of proceeding is to ask the person in a friendly way to abstain from communion and to invite him urgently to study the whole matter on the basis of God's Word so that he may very soon again be received at the Lord's table. If there are several of the church's members in the lodge, he warns against dealing with them as a group. Faithful, loving serious, and firm dealings with each individual in the Spirit of Christ is what he urges on his readers. As instructor in pastoral theology he says that this is the way we are training our students, and they are having remarkable success with it. The students were being trained to be both firm and evangelical.

Another organization concerning which we had to gain clarity in our pastoral practice is the Boy Scouts. The January 1931 issue of the *Quartalschrift* published a paper which Prof. John Meyer had delivered on this subject at a pastoral as well as at a teachers' conference the previous year.²² The reason for the paper was that there was some evident unclarity in our Synod about our position toward the Boy Scouts. What may have contributed to this confusion was that Prof. Theo. Graebner's book, *The Secret Empire*, considered it possible for Lutheran congregations to avoid the objectionable aspects of Scouting by organizing their own troops. In evaluating Scouting Prof. Meyer asked about the spirit of Scouting. He showed this to be essentially self-righteousness. But we are interested in his advice to the pastors and teachers on how to deal with Scouting. This must begin by first of all battling the spirit of Scouting, the spirit of self-righteousness, in our own hearts. Only as the Holy Spirit has brought us to abhor all self-righteousness will we effectively battle against its spirit among our children. He calls for love for the children, not simply a natural, human love, but one that is born out of the gospel. In dealing with the children, the Boy Scout question should not become a question simply of discipline or of logically and intellectually shaving its evils. We must remember that the Word of God is a power, that it is spirit and life. We must not merely teach this word, but proclaim and testify to it so that it may have its influence on our children. Prof. Meyer like our earlier fathers contended for a practice that was evangelical and firm.

That was the kind of practice that was being taught our pastors during these years at our Seminary. This was not the doing of men. This was not the accomplishment simply of the five men we have referred to. It was the grace of God pure and simple that was responsible for this.

This becomes all the more evident when we call to mind the conflict that raged within our Synod in the 20's and resulted in a split and in the termination of Prof. Koehler's work at our Seminary. We shall not have the time here to examine all aspects of the Protestant controversy. This is not the place to attempt an evaluation of Protestant and Synodical actions and to establish blame. We are, however, interested in examining its significance for the topic under discussion. It seems to me that the Protestant controversy posed a threat to evangelical practice in two ways. One is evident from the pages of Faith-Life, the periodical of the Protestant Conference. If the disregard for confidences, the judging of hearts, the imputing and impugning of motives that so often found its way into the pages of Faith-Life had become a generally accepted method in the practice in our congregations, evangelical practice would have suffered a severe setback. The grace of God preserved the Synod from this. The other danger this controversy posed for our practice is that the inexperience and the resulting ineptness that is ever present in dealing with such a controversy and the dismissal of Prof. Koehler could have led to a repudiation of everything he ever stood for with dire results for our practice. From that too, I believe, God in His grace preserved us. Koehler is still named and quoted with honor in our midst. His warning message against legalism first heard in 1914 and 1915²³ was again presented to a Synod convention in 1959 and heard with humble and penitent appreciation.²⁴ Let us recognize it as the grace of God that this could happen.

Much of what we have been talking about reaches back beyond the memory of many here present. However, most, if not all, of us remember well when in 1961 our Synod formally in convention declared our fellowship with the Missouri Synod suspended. When the Wisconsin Synod gave up its unionistic practices in

²² J. P. Meyer, "Boy Scouts," *Theologische Quartalschrift* (Jan. 1931) XXVIII, 25-52.

²³ J. P. Koehler, "Gesetzliches Wesen unter uns," *Theologische Quartalschrift* (Oct. 1914), XI, 213-241; (Jan., April, July, 9 5 , XII, 24-42, 97-108, 147-169.

²⁴ Proceedings of the Thirty-fifth convention, 1959, pp 120-164.

the 1860's, this fellowship was established. It was when the Missouri Synod over a period of two decades persisted in and defended unionistic practices that this suspension became scripturally necessary. If this fellowship had been maintained, there is little doubt that the practice of the Wisconsin Synod would have suffered a like deterioration. At the same time the Synod found itself accused by some of its own members of procrastination in the application of Romans 16:17-18 to the Missouri Synod. This resulted in the accusation that the Synod held to a false doctrine of fellowship, and the formation of the Church of the Lutheran Confession by those pastors and congregations that felt conscience bound to leave the Synod. Thus in this controversy there were forces pulling the Synod toward liberalism on the one hand and toward a rigorism akin to legalism on the other. Then too, the break in fellowship with Missouri also called for a practice that would take these new circumstances into account while solving the problems occasioned by the various joint projects of the two synods. The resolutions of 1961 express the intent to proceed firmly yet evangelically in these matters. When we see how our Synod emerged from this conflict, perhaps the most far-reaching in its history, we cannot but say: It was by the grace of God that we were preserved, strengthened, and unified through conflict.

Thus with all our faults, with all our weaknesses, with all our sins, God did not give up on us. He continued to call us to repentance, continued to work among us with His gospel, continued to have His holy Spirit guide us and preserve us, continued to send us faithful teachers as gifts to His church as they were needed. Thus by grace - He kept us confessional in practice. We shall not dwell on the gratitude toward our God that must overflow our hearts.

We have been speaking about the past. But what about the present? And what faces us in the future? If we say that we are confessional in practice now, that we are both evangelical and firm, this could easily degenerate into fleshly boasting. As we look at the present we do well not to speak of what we are and do, but rather to ask ourselves questions, searching questions. Here are some to get us started. Are we firm in our practice simply for the sake of firmness? Do we insist on a course of action without explaining the reason from Scripture? Have some of our practices become simply traditional? Do we try to convince people by referring to a policy of the Synod? Do we try to rationalize our course of action when we aren't sure of what we have done? Are we trying to force our people into certain forms or patterns of action? Do we try to manipulate the Word of God? Do we speak about faithfulness to Scripture without faithfully reading it? Not all that we see as we ask such questions will be good, not all will be agreeable and pleasant and God-pleasing. What we see as we examine ourselves can only lead us to marvel all the more that God should still be using us to make His gospel known in the world, to serve people in that which has eternal consequences. Humbly and thankfully we must say that GRACE alone preserves us so that we are what we are under the gospel.

But what about the future? Our Synod is not master of its fate. The Lord Jesus is the church's Head. He will determine also the future of our Synod. That does not, however, make us fatalists. The Lord Jesus does tell us how He will bless our Synod. The Lord Jesus also tells us what will destroy it. "Whosoever shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father who is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I deny before my Father, who is in heaven" (Mt 10:32,33). "If ye continue in my Word, then are ye my disciples indeed." Our Synod has a future only as by God's grace it uses His Word faithfully and confesses its Lord both in word and deed. If the time ever comes that we lose the gospel in our practice, that is evidence that we may already have lost it in our hearts. From that preserve us, heavenly Father.

A. W. Schuetze