

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH RESPONDS TO CONFLICT: THE CIVIL WAR AND ITS
ISSUES IN NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICA

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Abstract

The American Civil War had profound effect on those who experienced it. Over 600,000 succumbed to disease and warfare as a young nation struggled to define itself amid the day's most pressing questions. Should slavery have a place in a nation where "all men are created equal?" Should the central government in Washington, D.C. be able to impose measures on an individual state's government? These questions and others produced reactions in social, political, and economical spheres of American life that resulted in outright civil conflict by 1861. Sometimes overlooked, however, is what resulted in America's religious institutions. Some called for slavery's abolition, while others favored the practice. Some condemned secession, while others welcomed it. Some remained united, while others were torn asunder. The purpose of this paper is to examine such reactions, specifically as they regard the Lutheran church and its leaders. Three Lutheran synods will be taken into consideration: the General Synod, the Missouri Synod, and the Wisconsin Synod. An examination of these synods before and during the Civil War reveals this conclusion: Geographic location and doctrinal unity determined the effects of the Civil War and its issues upon the Lutheran synods of America.

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Introduction

On the morning of Sunday, July 21, 1861, civilians from Washington, D.C. woke early and travelled nearly thirty miles to Centreville, Virginia. They arrived on horseback and in carriages, armed with picnic baskets and opera glasses, waiting in anticipation for the first sights and sounds of activity. Soon the crowd was rewarded. Gunfire and smoke rose from a battlefield some five miles away.

Three months earlier, on April 12, 1861, General Pierre Gustave Toutant-Beauregard ordered his Confederate forces to fire upon the Union-held Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, thus marking the onset of the United States' bloodiest, most tragic conflict. Tensions rose in Washington, D.C. as those faithful to the Union clamored for decisive action. In response, President Lincoln urged General Irvin McDowell to lead his Army of the Potomac to Richmond, Virginia, then the capitol of the fledgling Confederacy. The hesitant and cautious McDowell stalled for some time along the banks of the Potomac River before finally agreeing to engage Beauregard's Confederate forces near Bull Run, a mere thirty miles or so from Washington, D.C.

As news of the impending battle spread, excitement in the nation's capitol grew. A Northern victory was not simply hoped for, but expected. The well-equipped and numerically superior Union army would sweep aside the Confederate upstarts in glorious display of national might. McDowell and his men would then march to Richmond and decapitate the young Confederacy. The war would be all but over only three months after it began.

Such were the expectations of those citizens who gathered near Centreville on July 21, 1861. Aristocrat and commoner alike camped five miles from the battlefield, hoping to catch a glimpse of Union victory.

The first reports they heard were encouraging; Confederate lines were giving way before McDowell's men, and it seemed that victory would soon follow. By late afternoon, however, Confederate reinforcements rushed in by railroad and the arrival of young, flamboyant cavalry commander "Jeb" Stuart had reversed the battle's momentum. The demoralized and fatigued Union army soon gave way, resulting in disorderly retreat. What was to be the first step toward Richmond quickly became a footrace to Washington, as Union infantry and officers cast aside guns, ammunition, and other supplies in their haste to escape the battlefield. Aiding the

confusion were the picnicking spectators at Centreville; when one of their number attempted to rally a fleeing mass of blue uniforms, they complemented his effort by joining the flight, though their desire to see action was certainly realized.

Throughout that night and the next day, civilians and soldiers filtered into the nation's capitol, carrying with them news of defeat. Gone was the expectation of an early conclusion to civil conflict. The First Battle of Bull Run revealed in sobering terms the Confederacy's resilience; nearly four and a half years of bloodshed and national agony followed in its wake.

The American Civil War had profound effect on American life. It pitted friends and family members against each other on both military and ideological battlefields. Names like Ulysses S. Grant, "Stonewall" Jackson, and Robert E. Lee became synonymous with glory and victory, or despair and defeat. Traditional battle methods clashed with newer, more destructive instruments of war. Northern industry progressed, while southern economy starved. The power of federal government was established over that of state government, and slavery was eventually forbidden in every state of the Union. Feelings of bitterness and resentment between North and South remained for years after the conflict, with traces of tension still lingering today.

The Civil War undoubtedly impacted social, political, and economical spheres of American life. Sometimes overlooked, however, is the effect it had on America's religious institutions.

Deeply woven into the fabric of the war was debate over African American slavery and the federal government's role in prohibiting it. For nearly half a century, slavery had boiled under the surface of American thought and ideology, now and then causing fissures in the nation where "all men are created equal." Southern economy relied on slave labor to fuel its numerous plantations, but harsh conditions and cruel overseers often made the life of a slave almost unbearable. It was common for African American families to be separated forever when individual members were sold to different owners. Slave owners could punish disobedience by whipping, deprivation, or virtually any other means they saw fit, even death. The slave was little more than property, though it must be said that not all slaveholders treated their slaves cruelly.

The way slavery was practiced in the United States had obvious moral implications, which church bodies throughout the United States reacted to in different ways. Some saw it as an affront to God's love for all mankind, while others claimed that God supported its institution. Some sounded the abolition of slavery from their pulpits, while others defended it. Some

distanced themselves from the issue, while others joined the debate. Some weathered internal disagreement and became stronger for it, while others shattered under the nation's most pressing question.

Adding fire to the debate was the "post-millennialist" belief that prevailed among many of America's Protestant church bodies in the North. Based on certain passages from the book of Revelation, post-millennialism held that the church will experience a period of peace and prosperity preceding Christ's return. "They believed that by their actions they could fulfill necessary conditions for the coming of God's kingdom on earth – that they could hasten the second coming of Christ through their deeds."¹ One major step in this process, they concluded, was the abolition of slavery. Such an attitude often resulted in wholesale denunciation of Southern ways from Northern pulpits.

Although slavery was the most prominent, it was not the only dividing agent in America's churches. Other issues evoked a reaction, such as whether or not a state had the right to secede from the Union and whether or not the federal government had the right to regulate state government affairs. Some church bodies voiced an opinion in these political and societal matters, while others resigned themselves to dealing with theological and spiritual concerns. It even occurred that some synod leaders had significantly stronger or even opposite opinions than the majority of those in the synod they served.

The purpose of this paper is to examine further such reactions that occurred before and during the Civil War, specifically as they regard three Lutheran church bodies and their leaders in America: the General Synod, the Missouri Synod, and the Wisconsin Synod.

Why these three? The scope of this project does not allow for a thorough examination of all or even most Lutheran synods that existed in mid-nineteenth century America, so this author has chosen three that display unique geographical and doctrinal differences in the years prior to and during the Civil War. The hope is that these paint a portrait of Lutheran reaction as a whole.

Geographically, the General Synod was a conglomeration of Lutheran synods spread throughout the colonized United States, with many residing in the East where the war was at its fiercest; the Missouri Synod was headquartered in a border state, placing it in a unique position

¹ Herman Hattaway and Lloyd A. Hunter, "The War Inside the Church," *The Civil War Times* (January 1988): 30.

to address the issues and concerns that the war brought on; the Wisconsin Synod was located in a state loyal to the Union, one rather distant from the theater of war.

Doctrinally, the General Synod held loosely to the Lutheran Confessions, demanding no strict doctrinal unity to join; the Missouri Synod held firmly to the Lutheran Confessions, seeking full doctrinal agreement before entering into fellowship; the Wisconsin Synod was at that time still defining its attitude toward the Lutheran Confession, and was in the process of echoing the Missouri Synod's stance toward doctrinal unity.

Thus we have three Lutheran synods unique in their location and theology. It is not my intention to determine whether or not the reactions these synods had to the Civil War and slavery were right or wrong in the light of God's Word, nor is it my intention to pass judgment on the issues that led to war, such as slavery or secession. Rather, I will discuss 1) how these Lutheran church bodies reacted to the Civil War and the issues that caused it, and 2) why these Lutheran church bodies reacted the way they did. Such an examination has led this author to conclude: Geographical location and doctrinal unity determined the effects of the Civil War and its issues upon the Lutheran synods of America.

Literature Review/Conducting of Research

Historians have given attention to the Civil War and the effect it had on Lutheran churches in America, such as in C.W. Heathcote's *The Lutheran Church and the Civil War* and Chester Dunham's *The Attitude of the Northern Clergy toward the South 1860-1865*, but it appears that nowhere has the specific scope of this thesis been addressed. Regardless, several works were instrumental in the researching and writing of this paper. They will be reviewed here.

What initially sparked my interest in researching this topic was an article in *Civil War Times* entitled "The War Inside the Church." The article details how various church bodies in America (not just Lutheran) responded to the Civil War and the issues that caused it. It provides both context and reasons for the schisms that took place, and is well worth a read for anyone interested in exploring Christian reaction to the nation's conflict.

Several other journal articles address the topic at hand, albeit indirectly, such as Paul Dybvig's "Lutheran Participation in the Civil War." Dybvig's article details various ways Lutherans participated in the war effort. They volunteered as soldiers, worked in hospitals,

circulated religious tracts, cared for war-orphans, and served as chaplains, among other activities. Dybvig's attention is focused more on Lutherans as a whole, rather than on individual church bodies, though some specific synods and individuals are mentioned by name. The article reveals that Lutheran men and women, clergy and lay, in both North and South, were active in the war effort.

Fascinating insight into how clergymen adapted to the political and religious climate of the Civil War is found in Marcus McArthur's "Treason in the Pulpit: The Problem of Apolitical Preaching in Civil War Missouri." According to McArthur, a caricature has long existed concerning the reaction of American clergyman to the civil strife seen in the 1860s. This caricature represents America's Civil War ministers as active political entities, each using the pulpit to infuse God's people with his own political convictions concerning the nation at war. While many preachers may have indeed fit this mold, McArthur argues that this model of American preaching during the Civil War requires reconstruction. As he shows, a sizable contingent of the clergy clung to the idea that their ministry ought to be void of political preaching; they believed that the affairs of state should in no way mingle with the affairs of religion when it came to ministerial duty. Some who held this belief even suffered dearly for it. Though no mention of the Lutheran Church is made, McArthur's expounding of the political and religious landscape of border states proves valuable in understanding how the Civil War affected the Missouri Synod, itself an entity that could be called apolitical.

Jon Joyce's "Effects of the Civil War on the Lutheran Church" explores the challenges and reactions experienced by America's Lutherans, focusing specifically on those in the East. The article reveals that the Civil War affected the Lutheran church on many levels, from the breaking up of synods to the fluctuating of church attendance. Joyce seems to reach the conclusion that, overall, the Civil War had a predominantly negative effect on America's Lutherans. Those looking for a brief overview of the effect of the Civil War on the Lutheran church will be pleased with this article.

Very helpful in my research was *The Lutherans in North America*, a work that details the emergence and growth of the Lutheran church in America from the mid-seventeenth century until the latter half of the twentieth century. Quotations from eyewitnesses, synod conventions, synod constitutions, and other primary sources give the reader a glimpse into the infancy and struggles of the Lutheran church as it established itself. Notable too is the plethora of in-page

footnotes that readily guide the reader to other sources for study. This volume especially contributed to my research concerning the General Synod and the great schism that occurred at the outbreak of the Civil War. In addition, it seemed that whenever a general overview of a topic was needed, *The Lutherans in North America* was ready to deliver it through easy navigation and concise summary. Other works similar in nature to *The Lutherans in North America* offered additional insights, such as F. Bente's *American Lutheranism Volume II*, Abdel Ross's *A Basic History of Lutheranism in America*, and E.J. Wolf's *The Lutherans in America*, which is of particular interest, as it was written no more than twenty-five years after the Civil War's conclusion.

Another work deserving mention is *Moving Frontiers*, a collection of documents pertaining to The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. While the whole compilation would be fascinating to read, only those documents that dealt directly with Missouri Synod response to the Civil War and its issues were taken into consideration here. Though not overwhelming in number, these nonetheless proved helpful in determining the attitude of the Missouri Synod and its leaders during those trying years.

The synodical proceedings of the Wisconsin Synod in the 1850s and 1860s greatly aided my research of that synod. Translated by Arnold Lehmann, these provided firsthand accounts of Wisconsin Synod thought and attitude in the years that led up to the Civil War and during the conflict itself.

Other writings aided my research as well, but none so much as the works previously listed. A comprehensive list can be found in the *Bibliography* portion of this paper.

Slavery: Growing Tensions in America

The American Civil War was fought from April 1861 to May 1865. It saw nearly two percent of the nation's population perish. Tens of thousands fell by gunfire, cannon shot, and hand-to-hand combat at places like Gettysburg, Antietam, and Chancellorsville. Dysentery, typhoid, and other diseases claimed around 400,000 lives. Over 10,000 fell at the Andersonville prison camp in South Carolina due to malnutrition and plague-like conditions. In all, the Civil War accounted for more than 600,000 deaths.

What provoked such tremendous loss of life? There is no simple answer. Certainly one issue at the heart of the conflict was African American slavery. Slavery was already a debated

issue in the 1780s when the United States Constitution was being written and ratified. Its authors resolved to protect slavery, as it would have been impossible to get southern delegates to ratify the Constitution otherwise. Until the Civil War, the United States government attempted to address the issue with the passing of laws that curbed slavery's influence.

As the United States continued to expand westward, a new question arose. What is the federal government's role in either allowing or prohibiting slavery? The Missouri Compromise of 1820 sought to address this question by allowing slavery in Missouri, but prohibiting it in other states north of 36°30'. This measure opened the door for new problems. Are non-slaveholding states obligated to return runaway slaves to their masters? The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act made it unlawful to do otherwise. Four years later, in 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act formally created the territories of Kansas and Nebraska, and also allowed white males to decide by vote whether or not theirs would be a slave-holding territory. As a result, both anti-slavery and pro-slavery elements flooded into Kansas and Nebraska in an effort to influence each territory's decision. Physical violence repeatedly occurred between these factions from 1854 to 1861, a crisis referred to as Bleeding Kansas.

The Missouri Compromise, the Fugitive Slave Act, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act provided guidelines as to where and how slavery could take place, but they did little to relieve the stress this issue was putting on the nation. It is clear, however, that the United States was a hotbed of political and societal debate concerning the slavery question in the half-century prior to the Civil War.

Aside from the passing of Acts and Compromises, several specific events indicate the stress slavery was placing on the nation.

In 1831, Nat Turner incited a bloody rebellion in southern Virginia. He and a group of fellow slaves ravaged several plantations and homes, adding both free and enslaved African Americans to their number as they went. Militia eventually put down the rebellion, though the uprising had by that time claimed the lives of approximately sixty white people. In backlash, an enraged mob beat and murdered scores of African Americans in the area. Though slave rebellion was not unheard of, the magnitude of Nat Turner's rebellion terrified slaveholders in Virginia and throughout the slaveholding south, resulting in even more severe restrictions on African American privileges.

The tension between northern and southern states reached new heights with the release of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. Through the medium of storytelling, Stowe depicted the most gruesome aspects of southern slavery. Many northerners were made aware for the first time of slavery's potential horrors, and were generally incensed that their neighbors to the south could commit such atrocities. Southerners, on the other hand, saw Stowe's work as slanderous exaggeration. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the best-selling book in nineteenth century America, second only to the Bible. This novel, perhaps more than anything else, contributed to the onset of the Civil War. Upon meeting Stowe, President Lincoln himself allegedly said, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war."²

Aggravating matters further was the Dred Scott case in 1857. Dred Scott, an African American slave, attempted to sue for freedom after his owners took him to states and territories where slavery was illegal. The case was brought before the United States Supreme Court, where Chief Justice Roger Taney ultimately concluded that, not only was it unconstitutional for Congress to prohibit slavery in certain states, but also that people of African American descent were not citizens of the United States, and thus enjoyed none of a citizen's rights, including the right to sue.³ These conclusions only further troubled the already unstable relationship between northern and southern states.

Two years later, in 1859, more coals were added to the fire. Determined abolitionist John Brown attempted to set in motion a slave revolt. He and almost twenty others seized a United States arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, hoping that slaves from the surrounding area would flock to their cause. No help came, and the attempt failed. Marines led by Robert E. Lee captured Brown, who was convicted of treason and hanged. Northern abolitionist groups lauded Brown's effort and portrayed him as a moral and religious hero, while Southerners feared that similar attempts might be made, causing renewed attention to their state militias. Again, the rift between free and slaveholding states widened.

What might be considered the death-knell of a peaceful resolution to growing tensions between North and South came in 1860 with the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency.

² Daniel R. Vollaro, "Lincoln, Stowe, and the 'Little Woman/Great War' Story: The Making, and Breaking, of a Great American Anecdote" *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 30, 1 (Winter 2009): 18-34. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.2629860.0030.104> (accessed September 1, 2014).

³ Judgment in the U.S. Supreme Court Case *Dred Scott v. John F.A. Sanford*, March 6, 1857; Case Files 1792-1995; Record Group 267; Records of the Supreme Court of the United States; National Archives.

Lincoln and his Republican party strongly advocated for the abolition of slavery, at least in states that did not already retain the practice. Southern states feared that Lincoln's anti-slavery attitude would eventually influence their own right to practice slavery. Thus, when Lincoln, whose name did not even appear on southern ballots, was elected in November 1860, South Carolina seceded from the Union only three months later. Mississippi, Florida, and other states quickly followed. By July 1861, shots had been fired on Fort Sumter, and the American Civil War had officially begun.

An overview of the issues concerning slavery that arose in the first half of the nineteenth century reveals that slavery was prominent in leading the nation to war. Yet, though it is accurate to say that slavery caused the Civil War, it is not a complete answer. Underlying the issue of slavery was a power struggle between the government on federal and state levels. Did the federal government have the right to impose measures on individual states of the Union, or was that right reserved for each state's respective government? This question did, however, find its clearest and loudest voice in the issue of slavery. Did the federal government have the right to determine whether or not a state was slaveholding or free, or was that reserved for each respective state to decide? The various acts and measures of the United States government catalogued above, such as the Missouri Compromise, were attempts at settling this dispute without really answering the question. Thus, disagreement fomented into secession and war, provoked by events like the Nat Turner rebellion, John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, and the election of an anti-slavery President.

Lutheran Reactions to the Civil War and Its Issues

By the 1860s, about 250,000 Lutherans lived in America. Their numbers generally aligned with how American population was dispersed throughout the northern, southern, and western parts of the nation. When war broke out in 1861, Lutherans joined in the various war efforts. They sent fathers and sons to war; their women served as nurses; their ministers served as chaplains; their seminary students assisted when they could by visiting military camps and battlefields, sometimes even forming military units of their own.⁴ As Paul Dybvig states, "All available evidence indicates that Lutherans participated in the war and actively engaged in

⁴ E. Clifford Nelson, ed. *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 166.

military service. There was more concern about *how* one should fight than asking *if* one should fight.”⁵

It was not only the war itself that Lutherans responded to, but the issues that caused it, as well. For example, the Tennessee Synod stated in 1822 regarding slavery: “Resolved: that the Synod unanimously consider it a great evil in our land, and wish that government if possible, would devise some means, as an antidote to this evil. The Synod also advise every master to treat his slaves well and to observe his christian [sic] duties toward them.”⁶

Perhaps the most drastic Lutheran response to the slavery question came in 1837, when several ministers and laymen split from the Hartwick Synod in New York because that body refused to condemn the practice of slavery in strong enough terms. They formed the Franckean Synod and declared that “slavery as it exists in the United States ... is a sin ... opposed to the spirit of the Gospel and a violation of the inalienable rights of man ... that we view the traffic in human beings as carried on in this country between the ministers of the Gospel and members of the churches, as revolting to humanity and as repugnant to the laws of Christ.”⁷ The Franckean even issued a “Fraternal Appeal,” imploring other Lutheran synods in America to oppose the practice of slavery.

The Lutheran church bodies under examination in this paper also responded to the Civil War and its issues. They discussed what was ravaging their nation at synod conventions, in periodicals, in personal letters, and the like. What follows is a survey of these responses. In addition, the author will provide an overview of each synod’s history before examining their respective reactions.

General Synod History Until the Civil War

The first Lutheran church body we will examine is the General Synod. In order to understand better how the General Synod reacted to slavery and the Civil War, an overview of its history is necessary.

⁵ Paul S. Dybvig, “Lutheran Participation in the Civil War,” *The Lutheran Quarterly* (November 1962): 295. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 1, 2014).

⁶ Carl S. Meyer, ed., *Moving Frontiers*, (Saint Louis, MI: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 44.

⁷ Nelson, 157.

In 1818, only three Lutheran synods existed in America: the Pennsylvania Ministerium, the New York Ministerium, and the North Carolina Synod. As Lutheranism continued to establish itself, and as synods began to form out of their parent bodies, the Pennsylvania Ministerium expressed its desire to unify Lutherans in America. At a meeting of the Pennsylvania Ministerium in 1818, it was “Resolved that the Synod regard it as desirable that the different Evangelical Lutheran Synods in the United States should in some way or other stand in closer connection with each other.”⁸ Thus, letters were sent to other synods, inviting them to send delegates to the Pennsylvania Ministerium’s next convention in 1819.

Three of the four synods then in existence were eager to form a union. The secretary of the North Carolina Synod, Gottlieb Shober, attended the 1819 convention with a plan for union already formulated. It called for a General Synod that would “meet every third year to regulate publications, modes of worship, and the formation of new synods,” and would also “fix grades of the ministry and hear appeals.”⁹ This “Proposed Plan” was passed by those in attendance at the Pennsylvania Ministerium’s convention of 1819. The newly formed Ohio Synod and the North Carolina Synod ratified the Plan, and in 1820 the General Synod was formed.

The General Synod was at its core an advisory body that would help regulate who and what was entering Lutheran churches. Its concern was not so much for strict adherence to the Lutheran Confessions or doctrinal unity as it was with church unity. An examination of the General Synod’s Constitution reveals its theological attitude:

“The Constitution of the first united Lutheran Church in America [i.e., the General Synod] contained no mention, either implicitly or explicitly, of the historical symbolical books of the church, not even the Augsburg Confession. It plainly respected differences of opinion affecting the consciences of its constituency both as to polity and doctrine. It placed on record an earnest desire to welcome any movement looking toward ‘concord and unity’ of Christians ‘of whatever kind or denomination.’”¹⁰

⁸ Edmund Jacob Wolf, *The Lutherans in America* (New York: J.A. Hill & Company, 1889), 323.

⁹ Nelson, 116.

¹⁰ Vergilius Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology. A Study of the Issue Between American Lutheranism and Old Lutheranism* (New York: Century, 1927), 39.

Despite its emphasis on unity, the General Synod still faced opposition. Only three years after the General Synod formed, the body that encouraged its formation, the Pennsylvania Ministerium, withdrew in 1823. Edmund Wolf explains the reason:

The trouble arose with the congregations. The idea was conceived and spread among them that such an organization might become an instrument of ecclesiastical tyranny ... So jealous, indeed, were the people of their political rights, the price of which had not yet been forgotten, so suspicious were they of authority, and so morbidly sensitive was their dread of power in any domain, that they professed to fear in such a union necessary for the strengthening and upbuilding of the Church, an institution dangerous to the liberties of the American people ... [T]he ministers of the Pennsylvania Synod felt constrained to yield to the adverse pressure, unreasonable and mistaken as it was, and to dissolve formal relations with the general body.¹¹

The Pennsylvania Ministerium was easily the largest body of the General Synod, and its withdrawal meant only the smaller synods of North Carolina and Ohio remained. The General Synod would likely have deteriorated after such a loss were it not for the efforts of Samuel Simon Schmucker. When the Pennsylvania Ministerium withdrew, the North Carolina and Ohio Synods thought it useless to send delegates to the next meeting of the General Synod. Schmucker, however, was not willing to give up the idea of a unified Lutheran church in America. He sent letters to synods and made personal visits to synod leaders in an effort to persuade them to send their delegates to the next meeting. When the General Synod next met, members were present from the West Pennsylvania Synod, the Maryland-Virginia Synod, the North Carolina Synod, and the Ohio Synod. Schmucker's efforts had preserved the General Synod, which now concentrated on persuading other synods to join.¹² In the following years, the General Synod worked persistently in the interest of God's Kingdom, its efforts including the promotion of mission work, the establishment of Christian education centers, and the production of Lutheran materials for its churches.

As the Civil War drew closer, the General Synod underwent some of its most trying times. On the American scene at that time were three Lutheran camps. Reformed professor Philip Schaff observed in 1854:

¹¹ Wolf, 334-335.

¹² Nelson, 122-123.

In general one may speak of three general tendencies in the American Lutheran church, excluding insignificant and local divisions. For brevity's sake, we shall call them the 'Neo-Lutheran,' the 'Old Lutheran,' and 'Moderate Lutheran,' or Melancthonian. The 'Neo-Lutheran' party ... is probably the largest, undoubtedly the most active, the most practical and progressive, and is best acquainted with the English spirit. It is to a large extent English and un-German, not only in language, but also in all its sympathies and antipathies....

The Old Lutheran division has just recently immigrated to America from Germany ...

They are still totally German and have not blended in the least with the English and American spirit ... The pastors of the Old Lutheran group are for the most well indoctrinated, faithful, conscientious, and self-sacrificing. At the same time ... they could hardly consider the most pious Reformed as a Christian and would not at any price partake of the Lord's Holy Supper with him....

The moderate Lutheran tendency standing in the center of these two extremes ... has the oldest American Lutheran tradition on its side, because the first missionaries came chiefly from the Halle Orphanage and from the Spener and Francke schools of Pietism ... A goodly number of their preachers, especially among older men, have few firm convictions, are poorly educated, stagnant, and are much more concerned about building programs and politics than theology and church affairs.¹³

Schaff's observations reveal the different Lutheran attitudes on display in America as the nation drew closer to war. The Old Lutherans, strengthened by German immigration in the 1840s, maintained a strict adherence to the 1580 Book of Concord. They were typified by such groups as the Missouri and Buffalo Synods. The Moderate Lutherans held loosely to the Lutheran Confessions, generally requiring adherence to only two of its documents, the Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism. The Neo-Lutherans, on the other hand, were essentially Lutheran in name only. "They were, in fact, much more closely identified with 'American Evangelicalism,' exhibiting a strong 'Arminianism' and an exaggerated anti-Romanism."¹⁴

It was with the growing tension between these three camps that the General Synod had to contend. One of its most prominent leaders, however, clearly leaned toward Neo-Lutheranism. Samuel Simon Schmucker, the man whose dedication to a unified Lutheran church in America had saved it in 1823, was likewise the "man who did more than any other to establish and strengthen the General Synod of the Lutheran Church in the United States, who for many years drafted its most important documents and was its acknowledged leader."¹⁵

¹³ Nelson, 211-212.

¹⁴ Ibid., 214.

Schmucker received his education from the University of Pennsylvania and Princeton Seminary, as well as from his father, the president of the Pennsylvania Ministerium. Both his formal and parental education shaped him into a man who had a vision for the Lutheran church in America. Among other things, he desired to rid the Lutheran church of deistic tendencies, to return to fundamental Christian doctrines, and to improve clergy education. The General Synod provided Schmucker with an “instrument” to achieve these goals.¹⁶

As one of its most prominent members, Schmucker’s theology influenced the theological tendencies of the General Synod. He held firmly to the belief that, if church bodies agreed on the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, e.g., the deity of Christ and full atonement in Christ, they thus maintained a common faith. He wrote, “The ground held by them [i.e., Christian bodies] in common should be considered fundamental, and the points of difference regarded in a secondary light as legitimate subjects for free and friendly inquiry.”¹⁷ There remained, however, fundamental errors that could not be overlooked, such as those held by Unitarians and Romanists.

Particularly interesting was Schmucker’s attitude toward the Augsburg Confession, the cornerstone of the Lutheran Confessions. He lauded the document for its proper exposition of fundamental doctrine, but refused to accept it in its entirety. Interestingly, Schmucker himself wrote as an inaugural oath for the Gettysburg Seminary in 1826, “I solemnly declare in the presence of God and the Directors of this Seminary that I do ... believe the Augsburg Confession and the Catechisms of Luther to be a summary and just exhibition of the fundamental doctrines of the Word of God.”¹⁸ Later, though, it became clear that he considered the Augsburg Confession insufficient to represent the General Synod and the Lutheran church in America. It was too specific for his liking. Rather, he chose to retain a more vague view concerning things like the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. Concerning Schmucker’s theology:

One may wonder what value or special benefit Schmucker found in retaining the identity of a Lutheran. The answer to this question lies in his conviction that the Augsburg Confession said just enough to insure the rejection of fundamental error but that it wisely

¹⁵ Ferm, viii.

¹⁶ Nelson, 121.

¹⁷ Ibid., 130.

¹⁸ Ibid., 217.

left other questions open. In matters such as the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, it is true, he would have been happier if the Augsburg Confession had been less specific, but he was willing to accept a few controversial points for the sake of his major goal.¹⁹

Schmucker's "major goal" seemed to be a united Lutheran church in America, one represented by a document more relevant and more theologically accurate than the old Augsburg Confession.

In pursuit of this goal, Schmucker trended farther and farther away from the traditional Lutheran Confessions. By 1853, however, Lutherans in America, including the General Synod, seemed to be leaning toward adherence to the Confessions, especially with the re-admittance of the Pennsylvania Synod and the influx of Old Lutherans from Germany. Schmucker and his more liberal allies deplored this trend, as they likely saw in it inevitable isolation from other church bodies who neither cared for nor understood the Lutheran Confessions. More importantly, Schmucker viewed the Augsburg Confession as not entirely adequate to represent the Lutheran church in America. Schmucker's brother-in-law wrote to him in 1853:

I hope that this unhappy condition of the Church will not continue long, and that the churches of the General Synod will do as the churches of the Augsburg Confession did in 1580 – exercise their right to declare what they regard as doctrines of the Sacred Scriptures in regard to all the points in dispute in the Church. I do not believe that the present position of the General Synod can long be maintained; it will either result in the Old-Lutheran men and synods gaining the control of the General Synod, and reintroducing those doctrines and practices of the symbols which the churches in this country and everywhere ought to abandon and condemn, and say that they do; or the friends of the American Lutheran Church must define what doctrines they do hold, and what they do reject ... I do not see how we can do otherwise than adopt the Symbols of the Church, or form a new symbol, which shall embrace all that is fundamental to Christianity in them, rejecting what is unscriptural, and supplying what is defective. A creed we must have, or we can have no real church union ... As long as the General Synod regards with equal favor, and is ready to receive, the Old Lutheran as well as the American Lutheran Synods, the symbolical men have a vast advantage, and they, no doubt, regard it as a triumph when the General Synod, meeting after meeting, continues to hold out its arms to every Lutheran synod, and recommends as heartily the reviews and institutions which are laboring to upturn its present foundations, as it does those which are known to hold the sentiments which it has hitherto fostered.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid., 131.

²⁰ F. Bente, *American Lutheranism: Volume II* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1919), 94-95.

In short, by the 1850s, rival factions of Lutherans were laboring for control of the General Synod. Old Lutherans wished to see the growing trend of confessional Lutheranism extend into the General Synod. Moderate Lutherans, like the Pennsylvania Synod, desired adherence to the Lutheran Confessions, but not so strictly as did the Old Lutherans. Neo-Lutherans, led by Schmucker and his brand of American Lutheranism, maintained that the Lutheran church in America needed to adapt to American culture or it would die. Adapting to American culture meant morphing the Lutheran church into a generic form of Protestantism. Schmucker wished to infuse it with “the vigor of Presbyterianism and the warmth of Methodism,”²¹ with the hope of creating a Lutheran church better suited to the American theological climate.

Thus, with control of the General Synod’s theological attitude at stake, Schmucker determined it was time to take a definitive step. In 1855, Schmucker authored the *Definite Platform*, a document that was intended to serve as the new doctrinal position of the General Synod. This new creed aimed to combat the growing influence of confessional Lutheranism, particularly as it came from Lutheran groups like the Missouri Synod.²²

The *Definite Platform* called for the General Synod to adopt a revised version of the Augsburg Confession. In the *Platform*, Schmucker wrote:

[W]hereas the General Synod of the American Lutheran Church, about a quarter of a century ago, again introduced a qualified acknowledgement of the Augsburg Confession, in the Constitution of her Theological Seminary, and in her Constitution for District Synods, at the ordination and licensure of ministers, without specifying the doctrines to be omitted, except by the designation that they are not fundamental doctrines of Scripture; and whereas a general desire has prevailed amongst our ministers and churches, to have this basis expressed in a more definite manner; and the General Synod has left this matter optional with each district Synod: Therefore we regarded it due to the cause of truth, as well as to ourselves and to the public, to specify more minutely what tenets of the Augsburg Confession, and of the former symbolic system are rejected, some by all, others by the great mass of the ministers and churches of the General Synod, in this country. Accordingly, the following American Recension of the Augsburg Confession, has been prepared ... In this revision, not a single sentence has been added to the Augsburg Confession, whilst those several aspects of doctrine have been omitted, which have long since been regarded by the great

²¹ Wolf, 364.

²² Bente, 96.

mass of our churches as unscriptural, and as remnants of Romish error. The only errors contained in the Confession (which are all omitted in this Recension) are

1. The Approval of the Ceremonies of the Mass.
2. Private Confession and Absolution.
3. Denial of the Divine obligation of the Christian Sabbath.
4. Baptismal Regeneration.
5. The Real Presence of the Body and Blood of the Savior in the Eucharist.

With these few exceptions, we retain the entire Augsburg Confession, with all the great doctrines of the Reformation. The other errors rejected in the second part of this doctrinal Platform, such as Exorcism, &c., are contained not in the Augsburg Confession, but in the other former symbolical books, and are here introduced as among the reasons for our rejection of all the other books except the Augsburg Confession ... Therefore, Resolved, That this Synod hereby avows its belief in the following doctrinal Platform, including the so called Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the American Recension of the Augsburg Confession, as a more definite expression of the doctrinal pledge prescribed by the General Synod's Constitution for District Synods, and as a correct exhibition of the Scripture doctrines discussed in it: and that we regard agreement among brethren on these subjects as a sufficient basis for harmonious cooperation in the same church.²³

Schmucker's *Platform* drew a clear line in the sand. Strict adherence to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and the other symbolical books of the Lutheran reformers was to be rejected. Yet, despite his claims that Lutheran churches and ministers desired such a doctrinal statement, only three synods approved the *Definite Platform*: the East Ohio Synod, the Wittenberg Synod, and the Olive Branch Synod.²⁴ In fact, Schmucker's attempt to establish American Lutheranism seemed to hurt his cause rather than help it. Many were indignant at this attack on the Augsburg Confession, and many who had before counted themselves as Schmucker's allies responded to the *Definite Platform* with criticism, despite pockets of support from places like the Gettysburg and Wittenburg Seminaries.²⁵

The final result was that the majority of the General Synod's members rejected the *Definite Platform*, and Schmucker's American Lutheranism, represented by the *Platform*, was

²³ Samuel Simon Schmucker, *Definite platform, doctrinal and disciplinarian, for Evangelical Lutheran district synods: constructed in accordance with the principles of the General Synod* [Book] (Philadelphia: Miller & Burlock, 1855, accessed November 30, 2014); available from <http://palni.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/copebooks/id/845>; Internet.

²⁴ Bente, 111.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 101-102.

defeated.²⁶ Its influence on the American Lutheran scene waned in the following years, though the tumult it had caused lingered.

Thus, we see the state of the General Synod when the Civil War broke out in 1861. Schmucker's attempt at liberalizing the Lutheran church with his Definite Platform had resulted in a counter-reaction that left the General Synod leaning more and more toward the unaltered Lutheran Confessions as its doctrinal foundation, and one of its most prominent leaders had been virtually discredited in the wake.

Unhappily for the General Synod, it was given little time to convalesce. When Schmucker introduced the *Definite Platform* in 1855 and brought with it theological conflict to America's Lutherans, it was clear that conflict was brewing on America's political horizons, as well. The years that followed would once again embroil the General Synod in controversy and schism, though of a different nature.

General Synod Reaction

The labors of the General Synod between its foundation and the Civil War increased its numbers substantially. The Synod of South Carolina joined in 1835, and the Virginia Synod in 1839. The Synod of the West, comprised of congregations in Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, joined in 1840. The Synods of Pennsylvania, Allegheny, and Southwest Virginia joined in 1845, the Illinois and Wittenberg Synods in 1848, the Olive Branch Synod in 1850, and the Northern Illinois and Pittsburg Synods in 1853, the Central Pennsylvania and English District of Ohio Synods in 1855, the Northern Indiana, Southern Illinois and English Iowa Synods in 1857, and the Melancthon Synod in 1859. At its peak in 1860, the General Synod numbered twenty-six synods spread throughout the colonized United States, comprising roughly two-thirds of the Lutheran church in America.²⁷

It was in this year that South Carolina formally seceded from the United States, followed quickly by Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas. By February 1861, these states had officially formed the Confederate States of America. When war officially broke out with the firing on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, the General Synod was quite aware of

²⁶ Nelson, 224.

²⁷ Wolf, 361-362.

problems that might arise within its ranks. The synod feared that its members in the northern and southern states would mirror the hostility that was rapidly increasing between the Union and Confederacy. It seemed that some sort of rupture was inevitable. The General Synod thus postponed a meeting that was to be held in May 1861 in the hope of delaying or even preventing altogether a split. Already at this time some southern ministers desired a divide between the General Synod's northern and southern elements.²⁸

By the time the General Synod next met in May 1862, the hostility between North and South had only grown fiercer. In April 1861, Lincoln called for 75,000 military volunteers, and Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina seceded from the Union. The First Battle of Bull Run was fought on July 21, 1861, and the fleeing citizens and soldiers that poured into Washington, D.C. after the battle convinced the Union that this war would be no short affair. By the beginning of 1862, Lincoln had issued a General War Order that called for mobilization of all Union forces against the enemy.

Thus, when the General Synod convened in May 1862, it came as no surprise that they found no southern delegates present. Five southern synods had withdrawn their membership. These were the Synods of North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Western Virginia, and Georgia, accounting for a total of "125 ministers, 205 congregations, and 21,098 communicants."²⁹

The Virginia Synod acted first in October 1861 by resolving:

Whereas it is manifest to us, in view of the final disruption of the former United States, the hostile attitude of those yet adhering to the remaining unscrupulous despotism at Washington and the uncharitable and intolerant spirit and bearing of many of those whom we once esteemed as brethren in the same faith, and the interest of our Church, loyalty to our government, as well as promptings of self respect, imperatively demand that we should at once dissolve all ecclesiastical alliance with them. Therefore, *Resolved*: that we do hereby withdraw our connection with the General Synod of the United States, and earnestly favor the organization of a General Synod of the Confederate States.³⁰

²⁸ Jon Loyd Joyce, "Effects of the Civil War on the Lutheran church," *Lutheran Quarterly* (1962), 14, no. 4: 301. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 1, 2014).

²⁹ Wolf, 362.

³⁰ Nelson, 243-244.

The South Carolina Synod soon followed. Its president, Elias B. Hort, said in his address to the synod in January 1862:

Through the mercy of God we are permitted once more to assemble as a Synod, and although not as anticipated in regard to time and place, or circumstances, our lives have been spared, and we have much to be truly thankful for. Merged in a war of self-defense, the preservation of our religious, social and political liberties, our cause is in the hands of Infinite Justice, and if faithful to God and to our country, we can not fear for the result.³¹

The South Carolina Synod resolved to withhold its delegates from the General Synod convention scheduled to meet in May of that year, and to pursue the possibility of forming a new body comprised of southern synods:

Whereas, in the distracted condition of our once happy country we deem it impracticable to send our delegates to the next meeting of the General Synod about to convene at Lancaster, Pennsylvania; and, feeling that other Synods South are in a similar situation with this body, therefore
Resolved, that we recommend a convention of all Southern delegates to the General Synod to meet at Salisbury, North Carolina, on Thursday preceding the third Sabbath in May, 1862, for the purpose of endorsing the proceedings of the next meeting of the General Synod if practicable; otherwise to take such steps as may best promote the future harmony and prosperity of that portion of the church represented by the absent delegates.
Resolved, that we hereby commission our present delegates to the General Synod to attend the said convention.³²

The North Carolina Synod echoed the sentiments of South Carolina, citing both its duty to the established government and the necessity of a southern General Synod. It resolved in 1862:

Whereas, the duty of rendering obedience to rulers and magistrates, as those ordained by God for the exercise of justice and the maintenance of order, is enjoined in the Word of God: *and whereas*, ... these states seceded and formed a government under the name of the Confederate States of America, therefore,

³¹ Nelson, 244.

³² *Ibid.*, 244.

Resolved, that we recognize the hand of God in the wisdom of those councils and the heroism of our brave defenders, which have enabled us to form a government of our choice.

Resolved, that we recognize the right of these States in having seceded and formed an independent government, to which our undivided allegiance is due.

Whereas, this Synod was formerly connected with the General Synod of the United States of America, in which we are represented by delegates, we have now arrived at the solemn conviction that it is essential to the good of our church and the glory of God, that the Evangelical Lutheran Churches of these Confederate States withdraw all connection with the Northern General Synod, and by this solemn and unanimous act declare our connection as a Synod dissolved.

Resolved, that we are in favor of forming a General Synod of the Confederate states on the basis of the Augsburg Confession, and that our delegates elected to the Convention, to be held in Salisbury, North Carolina, in this month, be empowered to vote for such an organization.³³

Both the Synods of South Carolina and North Carolina desired unification of the southern synods. Thus on May 15, 1862, a meeting was held at Salisbury, North Carolina for the purpose of determining the possibility of forming such a body. Although attendance was low, the delegates did establish a committee in charge of preparing a constitution and working toward a constituting convention. A year later, in May 1863, this convention met and elected its first president, officially forming the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Confederate States of America. This new body declared concerning the northern General Synod:

That ecclesiastical body, composed of the most influential Lutherans of the North, acknowledged and endorsed the unconstitutional acts of the Federal government; called and denounced secession as a crime, proclaimed through the Church that the defenders of liberty were rebels, insurgents and solemnly declared and branded our southern brethren as traitors to man, to their government, and to God. Hence we can never expect from them mercy or pardon, much less equal rights and privileges, unless we bow in submission to their opinions and denounce as wicked what we conscientiously believe to be just and right.³⁴

These assertions may seem harsh, but they likely came in response to a declaration of the General Synod in 1862. When no southern delegates attended the General Synod convention in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a committee was formed to report on the state of the country. This

³³ Nelson, 245.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 245-246.

report was silent on the defections of the southern synods, but strongly condemned the defection of the southern states:

That it is the deliberate judgment of this Synod, that the rebellion against the constitutional Government of this land is most wicked in its inception, unjustified in its cause, unnatural in its character, inhuman in its prosecution, oppressive in its aims, and destructive in its results to the highest interests of morality and religion.

That in the suppression of this rebellion and in the maintenance of the Constitution and the Union by the sword, we recognize an unavoidable necessity and a sacred duty, which the Government owes to the nation and to the world, and that therefore we call upon all our people to lift up holy hands of prayer to the God of battles, without personal wrath against the evildoers on the one hand, and without doubting the righteousness of our cause on the other, that He would give wisdom to the President and his counselors, and success to the army and navy, that our beloved land may speedily be delivered from treason and anarchy.³⁵

The General Synod clearly aligned itself with the Northern cause, condemning the South's revolt as "wicked ... unjustified ... unnatural ... inhuman ... oppressive ... and destructive" to "morality and religion." At the Lancaster meeting, the General Synod even appointed a special committee to deliver to President Lincoln a copy of its report, which would assure him of General Synod support and prayers. Perhaps this is one reason Lincoln called American Lutherans "the enlightened, influential, and loyal class of my fellow citizens."³⁶

After the Civil War concluded in 1865, one might think that the northern General Synod and the General Synod of the Confederate States would happily reunite, as the issue that divided them had been put to rest. Yet, just as tensions lingered between the southern and northern populous of the United States long after war ceased, so too did these two synods remain divided. The southern General Synod changed its name to the Evangelical Lutheran General Synod, South in 1866, and cited theological and confessional differences as the reason it wished to remain separate from the northern General Synod. Twenty years later, the southern General Synod again changed its name, this time to simply The United Synod, South. The northern and

³⁵ Nelson, 243.

³⁶ Abdel Ross Wentz, *A Basic History of Lutheranism in America* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1955), 162.

southern General Synods would remain divided for fifty years, until in 1918 they united (along with the General Council) to form the United Lutheran Church in America.³⁷

Missouri Synod History Until the Civil War

The next Lutheran church body under consideration is the Missouri Synod. Again, a brief overview of its history will aid in understanding its reactions to the Civil War and slavery.

Prominent in the history of the Missouri Synod is theologian Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther. Walther was born to Lutheran parents on October 25, 1811 in Saxony. His father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had all served as pastors in that province. It was perhaps assumed that young Ferdinand would follow in their footsteps.

The religious and scholastic climate in the German territories, however, was at that time predominately rationalistic and liberal. It was taught that the Bible and Christianity offered moral teachings, but little else. Disillusioned by what he heard from his teachers and professors, Walther turned his attention away from the study of theology at the age of eighteen. His father, though, offered young Ferdinand financial assistance if he would continue studying theology. Motivated also by a compelling biography of Pastor Jean Frédéric Oberlin, Walther enrolled at the University of Leipzig as a student of theology.³⁸

During his enrollment at Leipzig, framework was laid for the staunch, confessional Lutheranism that characterized Walther throughout his ministry, though it came apart from the religious instruction he was receiving at the University. Illness forced him to take a semester off during the winter of 1831-32. As he convalesced at his parents' home, Walther began reading his father's collection of Luther's writings. He developed the conviction that Luther's theology correctly reflected the Scriptures, and also began to share Luther's emphasis on the gospel message. By 1837, Walther was ordained and called to serve as pastor in Bräunsdorf, Saxony.³⁹

In 1817, Prussia's King Frederick William III had decreed a merger of the Reformed and Lutheran churches in his territory (the Prussian Union). This union caused fear among many confessional Lutherans in neighboring Saxony, thinking they might someday be forced into a

³⁷ Nelson, 247.

³⁸ Charles P. Schaum, ed., *Law and Gospel* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House), xix-xx.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, xx-xi.

similar merger. This fear, coupled with growing rationalist tendencies in the German Lutheran church, worried Walther.

So, under the impression that true Lutheranism would soon die out in Germany, Walther immigrated to America with Lutheran pastor Martin Stephan and about seven hundred likeminded individuals in 1838. They settled temporarily in St. Louis, Missouri while looking for nearby land on which they could establish their new community.⁴⁰

Pastor Stephan was the acknowledged leader of this German immigrant band. On the voyage from Europe, a group of clergyman, ministerial students, and lay delegates elected him as their bishop. Walther and others signed a document that ratified Stephan's office when the group arrived in America, assuring Stephan of their "sincere, complete, and childlike obedience."⁴¹

Their confidence in Pastor Stephan was to be short-lived. In 1839, two women independently came forward and confessed to having had adulterous relations with Stephan. Further examination into Stephan's orthodoxy and lifestyle resulted in his removal from office in that same year.

The German settlers became uneasy in the wake of Stephan's departure. They began to question the legitimacy of their emigration from Europe, and whether or not their new establishment in Missouri could rightly be called a church. This issue came to a head during a debate in 1841 between Walther and attorney Franz Marbach. The question under consideration was "Are we a church or not?" Walther won the debate by showing clearly that the body of immigrants in Missouri did, in fact, constitute a church, despite the possibility of having left Europe for improper reasons, or of having held to unscriptural doctrine. God's Word was proclaimed, and the Sacraments were administered in their midst. Thus, God's church was present.⁴²

With his success at the debate, Walther began to fill the leadership void created by Stephan's departure. He soon became pastor of the Trinity congregation in St. Louis, where he developed a constitution based on the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. This document

⁴⁰ Ibid., xxi-xxii.

⁴¹ Meyer, 135.

⁴² Schaum, xxiii-xxiv.

would serve as the basis for nearly all Missouri Synod congregational constitutions of the future.⁴³

In 1844, Walther began publishing *Der Lutheraner* (*The Lutheran*), a periodical that would serve Germans in the West with confessional Lutheran writings in the German language. *Der Lutheraner* soon came to the attention of several devout Lutheran pastors who had been recruited from Germany by Pastor J.K. Wilhelm Löhe. These men were displeased with their current church body, the Joint Synod of Ohio, because it lacked dedication to the Lutheran Confessions, and because the English language was gaining precedence in their seminary, which they believed would result in further deterioration of the Ohio Synod's confessional stance. These concerns they saw remedied in Walther's *Der Lutheraner*. As a result, they split from the Joint Synod of Ohio, contacted Walther, and discussions were soon begun concerning the unification of confessional Lutheran congregations in and around Missouri.⁴⁴

The first of these discussions took place in 1846, when Walther and the Löhe men met at Trinity congregation in St. Louis to explore the possibility of forming a synod. A portion from the draft of the constitution they formed reveals their theological stance:

Acceptance of the Holy Scripture, both the Old and the New Testament, as the written Word of God and as the only rule and norm of faith and life.
Acceptance of all the symbolical books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (these are the three Ecumenical Symbols, the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, the Large and the Small Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord) as the pure and unadulterated explanation and presentation of the Word of God.⁴⁵

Still wary of church leadership due to their history with Pastor Stephan, members of Trinity rejected the initial plans. Regardless, they voted to send Walther to another meeting in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where further discussion took place. Here more German immigrants became involved, led once again by pastors Löhe had recruited, bolstering interest in forming a synod even further. "Strong confessional convictions"⁴⁶ banded these men together, resulting in

⁴³ Ibid., xxvi-xxvi.

⁴⁴ Nelson, 179.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 180.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 180.

another meeting in April 1847, this time in Chicago with twenty-five congregations represented. Here they officially formed The German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and other States (in this paper referred to simply as the Missouri Synod), and they elected Walther as its first president.⁴⁷

The support of Löhe's pastors and their desire to unite under a confessional standard was monumental in the formation of the Missouri Synod. Walther certainly played a role, but the impetus is rightly credited to the Löhe men. Yet, it was Walther whom they looked to for leadership, as evidenced by his election to the synod's presidency. His consistent emphasis on Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions would guide the synod throughout its formative years. He served as pastor of Trinity congregation in St. Louis, and helped establish several daughter congregations within the city. At various times from 1849 to 1878, Walther filled the roles of seminary professor, seminary president, and synod president, all the while continuing to promote confessional Lutheranism in western America through the periodicals he established, *Der Lutheraner* and *Lehre und Wehre (Doctrine and Defense)*.⁴⁸

Several factors contributed to the growth of the Missouri Synod after its formation in 1847. Chief among these was an influx of German immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s. The Missouri Synod became active among these immigrants, establishing congregations in Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. Not long after the "Gold Rush" began, the Synod even discussed the possibility of establishing congregations in California to serve the Germans and Chinese there.⁴⁹

Mission zeal alone was not enough to ensure the Missouri Synod's expansion. It needed also those who would carry God's message to the new settlements, but a shortage of pastors made it impossible for each new congregation to have its own ordained man. To combat this problem, the Missouri Synod enlisted "visitors" to survey settlements and, if possible, encourage them to form congregations; colporteurs to sell and distribute Lutheran literature among the settlers; and "missionaries at large," ordained men that divided their services between various

⁴⁷ Meyer, 143.

⁴⁸ Schaum, xxvii-xxviii.

⁴⁹ Meyer, 196-202.

settlements. It is because of such efforts that the Missouri Synod was able to grow from a mere twenty-five congregations in 1847 to over one hundred by 1854.⁵⁰

Only one year later, in 1855, trouble arose from a prominent leader in the General Synod. Samuel Simon Schmucker released the *Definite Platform*, in which he made specific accusations against the Missouri Synod concerning private confession:

As the Sacred Volume contains not a single command, that laymen should confess their sins to ministers, anymore than ministers to laymen; and as not a single such example of confession is contained in the Word of God, our American Church has universally repudiated the practice. By the old Lutheran Synod of Missouri, consisting entirely of Europeans, this rite is still observed.⁵¹

In response, the Missouri Synod periodical *Lehre und Wehre* stated that the practice of private confession was retained “not because it may have derived from ancient church usage, but because it is not contrary to Scripture and affords a wonderful opportunity for evangelical pastoral care.”⁵² Furthermore, the periodical ascribed Schmucker’s theology to the influence of “two tyrants, more terrible than Antiochus Epiphanes and Herod: rationalism and Roman Catholicism.”⁵³

Despite slander from one of America’s most well known and influential Lutherans, Missouri’s president expressed interest in discussing unity with other Lutheran bodies. Unlike Schmucker’s General Synod, however, Walther was not willing to sacrifice doctrinal agreement for the sake of such union. In 1856, he led the way in conducting a “free conference,” in which Lutheran leaders from different synods were invited to discuss theology and the Augsburg Confession in hopes of eventually reaching doctrinal unity. Walther outlined the purpose of the conference:

So we venture openly to inquire: would not meetings, held at intervals, by such members of churches as call themselves Lutheran and acknowledge and confess without reservation that the unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530 is the pure and true statement

⁵⁰ Ibid., 187-204.

⁵¹ Nelson, 225.

⁵² Ibid., 225.

⁵³ Ibid., 226.

of the doctrine of sacred Scripture, and is also their own belief, promote and advance the efforts towards the final establishment of one single Evangelical Lutheran Church of America? We for our part would be ready with all our heart to take part in such a conference of truly believing Lutherans whenever and wherever such a conference would be held....⁵⁴

Subsequent conferences were held yearly from 1857-59, and a fifth was cancelled in 1860 because Walther and another prominent theologian were unable to attend.⁵⁵

Thus, we see the condition of the Missouri Synod when the Civil War broke out in 1861. Walther and Löhle's pastors had formed the Synod on a firm confessional Lutheran foundation, and publications like *Der Lutheraner* and *Lehre und Wehre* were heralding this theology not only among Missouri Synod congregations, but throughout Lutheran America, as well. Free conferences were being held to determine the possibility of joining together with other conservative Lutheran synods. The Synod itself was growing and quickly becoming entrenched as a bastion of confessionalism in the Midwest, regardless of anti-confessional backlash from the likes of Schmucker. At its helm was Carl Ferdinand Walther, a man who would continue to guide and define the Missouri Synod through some of the nation's most trying years.

Missouri Synod Reaction

Some of the earliest tidings of civil conflict took place on Missouri soil. The 1820 Missouri Compromise allowed the proposed state of Missouri to retain slavery, but prevented its establishment further north and west. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act virtually annulled the Compromise; newly-formed Kansas was able to determine for itself whether it would be slaveholding or free, resulting in bloody skirmishes between anti- and pro-slavery elements on the border of Kansas and Missouri. In 1857, the monumental Dred Scott court case was initially heard in St. Louis before reaching the U.S. Supreme Court.

When war was finally declared, the state of Missouri found itself in a precarious position. To the south and southeast were Arkansas and Tennessee, both states that declared for the Confederacy in 1861. To the north and northeast were the Union states of Iowa and Illinois.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 229.

⁵⁵ Schaum, xxviii-xxix.

Missouri retained the practice of slavery and was predominantly pro-Southern in sympathy, but nonetheless maintained a fragile neutrality throughout the conflict. Despite its officially neutral status, the border state supplied fighting men for both sides and saw more than a handful of battles.

The social and political issues that resounded in the state of Missouri extended into the Missouri Synod, as well. It was impossible for the synod to escape or ignore the conflict echoing through the state, but synod officials remained mostly silent, only addressing the growing tensions several times in periodicals, at district conventions, and even in personal letters to loved ones. Yet, the synod's relative silence should not be considered unique. Though a caricature seems to exist that the majority of preachers during the Civil War dragged politics into the pulpit, preaching sermons either condemning or condoning secession, slavery, political candidates, etc., a case is rightly made that a large contingent of clergy advocated "apolitical" preaching, wherein the nation's affairs had no place in a preacher's message.⁵⁶

Of interest is the stance the Missouri Synod took regarding slavery. Most Lutherans at that time, including the German Lutherans in Missouri, supported Lincoln and his desire to abolish slavery. The official Missouri Synod stance maintained that slavery as an institution was not sinful, while still condemning the evils that sprang from it. More deplorable were overzealous abolitionists. The Synod's periodical *Lehre und Wehre* professed in 1863:

Having set forth this *status controversiae* [that slavery per se is not sinful], we therefore maintain that *abolitionism*, which holds and declares slavery as an essentially sinful relationship and every master of a slave thereby as a malefactor and therefore wants to abolish the former under all circumstances, is a *child* of unbelief and its unfolding, rationalism, deistic philanthropism, pantheism, materialism, atheism, and a brother of modern socialism, Jacobinism, and communism....⁵⁷

Synod President C. F. W. Walther's attitude fully aligned with such a statement, though he generally kept his political views to himself. He even once referred to the Republican party as a "revolutionary mob."⁵⁸ Unlike many of his Lutheran brethren, Walther was convinced that the

⁵⁶ Marcus J. McArthur, "Treason in the pulpit: the problem of apolitical preaching in Civil War Missouri," *Journal Of Church And State* (2011), 53, no. 4: 548-549. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 1, 2014).

⁵⁷ Meyer, 234.

⁵⁸ Nelson, 239.

Scriptures do not condemn the institution of slavery; rather, commands like those found in Ephesians 6 concerning a slave's obedience to his master support it.⁵⁹

One must not assume that the leader of the Missouri Synod esteemed the institution of slavery. He likely deplored the cruelty some masters worked upon their African American slaves. His concern, however, was more for a keeping of the peace than for civil liberties; he had “a regard for the spiritual, more than the physical welfare.”⁶⁰ Walther and other synod officials emphasized faithful citizenship above becoming embroiled in political and social affairs. This prompted Walther to write in 1861 for *Der Lutheraner*:

A time of severe divine visitation has come over our land. A bloody civil war has broken out among us, which quickly and suddenly has already plucked thousands out of time into eternity. And still our future continues to lie dismal and dark before us. God at long last began to punish our people for its sins with a hard rod and it seems this rod is still lifted for always new and ever more severe blows. O dear Christian, Lutheran readers, let us humble ourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God! ... But if we examine ourselves, then we, too, everywhere notice sin and unfaithfulness – satiety of God's Word; deficiencies in love, humility, mildness and patience; greed and a secular spirit, conformity with the world; indolence in prayer and watching; ingratitude and discontent; and the like.... O dear Christians, let us not then idly wait perhaps for a general repentance of our whole American Nineveh but rather remember our own great part in the general guilt and ourselves heartily repent....

What should and will we do now, you Lutherans? Let us do this: let us prove [in our actions] that as good *Lutherans* we are indeed also good *citizens*. Let us in accord with Paul's admonition genuinely “be subject to the higher powers, which rule over us”....⁶¹

Regardless of Walther's emphasis on the spiritual over the physical, his attitudes toward secession and slavery bore criticism near the end of the war. A colleague of his, Gustav Seyffarth, published four articles in a New York Lutheran periodical that slandered Walther for believing that the North had waged an unjust war, that slavery in America was a “divine institution,” and that dissenters were not Christian, nonetheless Lutheran. Walther responded in *Lehre und Wehre* by defending secession and slavery on the basis of the Scriptures. This only

⁵⁹ Wentz, 162-163.

⁶⁰ Meyer, 235.

⁶¹ Meyer, 235-236.

resulted in more fallout. The Missouri Synod seminary faculty became divided over the issue, and relations with the Norwegian Synod to the north were strained.⁶²

The Civil War brought more to the Missouri Synod than tension over slavery and political ideology. Shortly after the war began, Union troops occupied St. Louis, and there was concern that a conflict might develop between these soldiers and state militia that supported the Confederacy. Walther, at that time residing in St. Louis, sent his wife and children out of the city for fear of what might occur. His fears were realized on May 10, 1861 when Union forces engaged with the state militia in “the Camp Jackson Affair.” On that same day, Walther wrote a letter to his wife that espoused trust in God and seemed to lean in favor of the Southern cause:

The battle has indeed, as I just heard, already begun here, but far from the college [i.e., Concordia Seminary]. The arsenal and the marine hospital have been abandoned by all but a few men. Almost all of the soldiers marched out to the camp of the Missouri state troops and there they began a brawl. You can see from this how graciously our dear God has cared for me. What will happen later indeed no mortal man can know, but that God will continue to govern and to be a protector of those who trust in Him is certain.... P.S. The soldiers, I hear, have returned to the arsenal and the hospital, and that with great shouts of victory. They have confiscated the weapons from the state troops out of their encampment. This victory will make them very arrogant indeed. But God has not been conquered and hurled down from His throne thereby. When He will say: “So far and no farther!” then it will be finished.⁶³

Although it is possible that Walther favored the Southern cause, the sympathy of others in the Missouri Synod rested with the North. During the Camp Jackson Affair, skirmishes broke out in St. Louis between Northern and Southern sympathizers, and Concordia Seminary was temporarily closed as a result. The students did not lay idle, but instead they elected officers and drilled daily in support of the Northern cause. When the tension resided, the students disbanded. According to Walther, at many times throughout the war the Union flag flew over Concordia Seminary.⁶⁴

The Missouri Synod reacted to the Civil War and its issues in much the same way the state of Missouri did; it essentially declared itself officially neutral. It took no official stand

⁶² Wentz, 163.

⁶³ Meyer, 234-235.

⁶⁴ Nelson, 242.

either for or against either side of the conflict, yet pockets of pro-Northern and pro-Southern sympathy seemed to reside under the neutrality, perhaps favoring the North over the South. Missouri Synod leadership saw in the war an opportunity, not to define itself politically, but to emphasize faithfulness as a citizen and faithfulness as a Lutheran Christian.

Wisconsin Synod History Until Civil War

The final church body under consideration is the Wisconsin Synod, a body that today extends throughout the United States and into many foreign mission fields. Its beginnings, however, were small and humble in comparison with what it would become. The following history of the Wisconsin Synod relies heavily on the work of Edward C. Fredrich's *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans* and on synodical proceedings from the Wisconsin Synod's early years.

Instrumental in the founding of the Wisconsin Synod was a missionary training school in Germany. Beginning in 1837, the Langenberg Mission Society sent missionaries to evangelize the unchurched of North America, three of whom were missionaries John Muehlhaeuser, John Weinmann, and William Wrede. They would eventually establish the earliest roots of what is today known as the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.⁶⁵

Muehlhaeuser was a baker by trade, but soon became zealous for evangelism. He thus enlisted as a "pilgrim missionary" and spread the gospel in Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary. Yet, his desire was for foreign mission work, and to this end he entered the Barmen mission school in 1835. He envisioned the mission of fields of Africa and Asia, but leaders at Barmen felt Muehlhaeuser would have difficulty learning foreign language in his mid-thirties, so 1837 found him immigrating to the city of New York. Here he found it difficult to instruct in the English language, and so headed inland to Rochester, where he filled a vacancy and soon became licensed as a pastor by the New York Ministerium. He served the Rochester congregation for ten years before moving to Milwaukee in 1848 after hearing of the great need for pastors in that territory. There he established an evangelical congregation called Grace, which exists under the same name today.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Edward C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000), 4.

Weinmann emigrated from Europe in 1846 in response to an appeal the Langenberg Society had received for a pastor in the Milwaukee area. Upon his arrival in America, he connected with fellow missionary Muehlhaeuser before heading to Town Oakwood in the territory of Wisconsin. There he saw a dire need for the presence of more pastors, and consequently contacted Muehlhaeuser who then vacated his call in Rochester, New York and joined Weinmann. Weinmann's "work at Oakwood stretched southward and northward and involved stations at Caledonia, Greenfield, and New Berlin."⁶⁷ He soon was called to serve a congregation in Racine. In 1853 Weinmann accepted a call to serve a congregation in Baltimore, and after five years he returned to Germany. When he attempted to return to America, his ship burned at sea.

The highly educated William Wrede immigrated to America with Weinmann in 1846. He began his ministry in America by serving a congregation at Callicoon, New York. In 1849 he moved to Wisconsin to serve the Granville congregation, and eventually filled the vacancy created in Racine by Weinmann's departure.⁶⁸

By 1849, three Langenberg missionaries were established in the Milwaukee area, and their efforts would soon produce the Wisconsin Synod. A fourth, Paul Meiss, joined them when they met in Milwaukee in 1849 to discuss the formation of a synod. Weinmann recorded what took place at the meeting:

On December 8, 1849, Pastors Muehlhaeuser, Wrede, Weinmann, and Meiss assembled in Milwaukee in the church hall of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in order mutually to consider and discuss the important matter of organizing a synod in Wisconsin. This assembly was opened with hymn and prayer and then the main agenda item was brought into consideration. After a wide-ranging discussion on the part of the pastors mentioned it was unanimously desired and deemed necessary at this time to organize a synod in Wisconsin. These resolutions were then passed:

1. That the synod to be formed should have and maintain the name, "The First German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin" and should be perpetuated for all time under that name and designation;
2. That the officers of said synod should on this occasion be elected for two-year terms. In this election the following persons were chosen as officers: Pastor Muehlhaeuser as president, Pastor Weinmann as secretary, Pastor Wrede as treasurer.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 4-6.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁸ Fredrich, 7-8.

President Muehlhaeuser was then directed to prepare as soon as possible a constitution for the synod which should correspond to its confessional stand. Finally it was resolved that the next year's synodical meeting take place on May 27, 1850 in Granville, Wis., to which the members are to bring their annual reports. Done on December 8, 1849, in Milwaukee.⁶⁹

In May 1850 the pastors met again, this time with the addition of Kaspar Pluess. President Muehlhaeuser came prepared with a constitution, which was discussed extensively. Part of its fourth section, "Concerning Licensed Candidates," sheds light on the theological leaning of the Wisconsin men:

When ordained each candidate will be pledged to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and to the other Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and will be asked the following questions:

1. Do you believe that the fundamental teachings of the Holy Scripture are purely, essentially, and correctly contained in the doctrinal articles of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and the other Evangelical Lutheran confessional writings?
2. Are you also definitely determined to make them the doctrinal standard in your important office and to teach according to them always?⁷⁰

It was at this meeting between Muehlhaeuser, Weinmann, Wrede, Meiss, and Pluess that The First German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin was officially formed.

On paper, the Wisconsin Synod was founded on confessional principles. Later, however, references to the Lutheran Confessions were stricken from the constitution and replaced with phrases like "pure Bible Christianity" and "pure Bible Word." It is likely that this was done by Muehlhaeuser, and demonstrates that the early Wisconsin Synod was divided concerning certain Lutheran principles.⁷¹

At the heart of the issue was difference of opinion concerning what type of Lutheranism would be confessed. In existence at that time were the Old Lutheran and New Lutheran camps, both stemming from King Frederick William III's Prussian Union of 1817. King William wished to see the Lutheran and Reformed churches of Prussia exist in harmony, so he declared them a single church body, though no change in doctrine was mandatory. Those who feared and

⁶⁹ Ibid., 11-12.

⁷⁰ Fredrich, 12.

⁷¹ Ibid., 13.

rejected such a union became known as Old Lutherans, and many, such as the Saxon immigrants who would form the Missouri Synod, fled Germany in an effort to remain distinct. The New Lutherans, on the other hand, were those that accepted union with the Reformed. They felt that such a union was acceptable so long as no doctrine was compromised, though, as Fredrich notes, “the union situation itself, in whatever form, was already such a compromise.”⁷²

Elements of both schools found their way into America and the early Wisconsin Synod. Muehlhaeuser declared himself a New Lutheran and saw benefits in being such:

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 [sic] 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.⁷³

The fact that such sentiments were held by the Wisconsin Synod’s president caused it to be labeled as a unionistic church body by its more confessional Lutheran brethren, like the Synods of Missouri and Buffalo.

A dispute that arose in 1854 reveals further the ambiguous identity of the Wisconsin Synod in its early years. The synodical convention of that year received a complaint from a congregation in Slinger, Wisconsin accusing its pastor, J. Sauer, of introducing “Lutheran ceremonies” into worship services, such as chanting. It seems there was also some tension concerning distribution of the Lord’s Supper. The synodical proceedings from that year addressed the crisis:

The matter concerning Candidate Sauer. A complaint from Schleisingerville [i.e., Slinger] was lodged against Sauer’s handling of his ministerial office. Candidate Sauer was given the floor. He stated when he first arrived there he chanted the benediction. At the request of several congregation members he discontinued it. The Lutherans however wanted the chants. A congregational meeting was called. The Reformed members however prevented a vote. After receiving another request Sauer opened the service with the Old-Lutheran chants. Candidate Sauer declared that he would gladly accept the decision of the synod. Pastor J. Conrad, who was well acquainted with the situation, was asked to express his opinion of the matter. He

⁷² Ibid., 10.

⁷³ Fredrich, 10-11.

especially referred to the error that Sauer accepted his pastoral office there in a manner in which he practiced just the opposite.

It was moved and supported that two delegates, namely the Hon. Bading and Conrad, be sent to the congregation and be authorized to propose to the congregation members that they accept the distribution of bread in the Lord's Supper, and that the Lutherans relinquish the use of the other liturgical practices. Secondly, to propose if it were absolutely necessary to maintain peace, that both wafers and bread be used in the Lord's Supper.

Pastor Goldammer violently opposed this – he demonstrated how this double offering was contrary to the essence of the Lord's Supper, which should demonstrate the communion and oneness of the Lord's Supper guests. In addition he especially pointed out the result which such an introduction of wafers and bread would lead to, namely through the double offering [of the Body] the cause for a split would be given to the next generation – if the congregation would indeed have a future. However no further action was taken on the matter.⁷⁴

As these proceedings show, early Wisconsin Synod churches contained both Reformed and Lutheran elements, and synod leadership struggled to appease both bodies. “Goldammer's point is well taken but the majority of his brethren were still caught up in the impossible dream of trying to serve the Reformed as they wanted to be served while remaining Lutheran.”⁷⁵ Not long could such a dichotomy exist, straddling the fence between strict confessional Lutheranism and a more liberal unionistic Lutheranism.

It was not long before the Wisconsin Synod would take steps to establish itself as a strong confessional church body. Already when the synod was formed in 1850, Weinmann and Wrede had adapted Muehlhaeuser's proposed constitution into a more confessional document. A watershed moment occurred when John Bading was elected as the synod's president in 1860. Throughout Muehlhaeuser's ten-year presidency, the Wisconsin Synod had remained a murky church body, unable to define itself either on a congregational or leadership level. Bading's presidency would provide the necessary leadership to bring the Wisconsin Synod to its current staunch confessionalism.

The Langenberg Mission Society introduced Bading to the Wisconsin Synod in 1853 after he had received training in a German mission society. He was assigned to a post in Calument, Wisconsin, and his ordination there proved interesting.

⁷⁴ Arnold Lehmann, trans., “Synodical Convention, June 11th to 14th at the Granville Congregation, Milwaukee Co. [1854],” *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (October 1992): 4-5.

⁷⁵ Fredrich, 29.

President Muehlhaeuser was in charge of ordaining Bading, but disagreement occurred over the manner of his ordination. Bading insisted on “being pledged totally to all the Lutheran Confessions.” Muehlhaeuser responded by calling Confessions “paper fences.” Ever the peacekeeper, Muehlhaeuser eventually acceded. Bading then preached on the value and necessity of the Lutheran Confessions, offering a foreshadowing of the theological stance that would define his ministry.⁷⁶

Bading moved from Calumet to Theresa, Wisconsin in 1855, and there he fell in with other pastors who echoed his confessionalism. Gottlieb Reim in Ashford, Philipp Koehler in the West Bend area, and Elias Sauer in the Slinger area would aid Bading in making the Wisconsin Synod a truly Lutheran synod.⁷⁷

In 1860, Muehlhaeuser refused reelection to the synodical presidency because he felt the presidential burdens were becoming too taxing, and Bading was elected instead. His second presidential address at the synodical convention in 1862 made it clear that he intended to lead the Wisconsin Synod toward greater respect for and adherence to the Lutheran Confessions and doctrinal unity:

First, we must all as one be aware of our existence in doctrinal and confessional unity, and all the more so seek to make happen in regard to doctrine what Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no division among you, and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.” Also what we read in the letter to the Romans: “Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned”....

Do we have in our Lutheran church a doctrine pure and unadulterated? The justification of the poor, lost and condemned sinner by faith through grace through the merit of our Savior Jesus Christ, the basic doctrine of all Christian doctrines, the doctrine of sanctification, as the necessary fruit and result of the only true justification before God, the doctrine of the Sacraments of Holy Baptism as the washing of rebirth, and the Holy Lord’s Supper as the sharing of the true body and blood of Christ in, with and under the bread and wine, the doctrine of absolution as the special promise of the peace and forgiveness of sins of the penitent, believing sinner and of much else as stated clearly and distinctly in the confessional writings of our dear Lutheran Church, and richly and on the sound basis of Scripture substantiated by our learned and believing fathers in their own writings.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁷⁷ Fredrich, 30.

I do not have to request our Hon. synod to accept these confessional writings; it has already accepted them as its confessional stand. This was articulated anew to the entire world first in earlier years in a detailed statement and in several select theses therefrom. . . .

As a result of our ordination into the preaching ministry all of us are under obligations to the confessional writings of our church, not just because of these themselves, but because they are in agreement with the Word of God.

But isn't it one thing to have the correct, true and unadulterated doctrine on paper and another thing to accept it with a clear personal knowledge and with a personal childlike faith? What I would urge you to do, revered and beloved brothers, is to set your mind on a greater study of doctrine, to plunge deeper and more diligently into the depths which our gifted and pious forefathers have dug for us, to be more desirous to learn from the old teachers of our church, at whose feet we truly would not be ashamed to sit, since they lead us deeper into the Holy Scripture, offer us pure gold out of the rich sources and establish us more firmly in our faith which is not the case in general with today's theology . . . If we do that, if we unearth the old foundations of our fathers as Isaac opened the well of his father Abraham, if we through prayer and supplication of the Holy Spirit and with a desire for the truth study our confessions and the fathers, blessed results will not be lacking . . . Our confession of faith would then not remain on paper, but appear in flesh and blood and thus would be the true expression of our hearts and mouths. Some differences in this or that doctrine, so-called individual opinions and views, will weaken the power of truth and its glory, thus effecting one of the greatest hindrances to brotherly, harmonious and God pleasing togetherness at synodical conventions. Oh how great is the blessing of true and upright unity in doctrine and confession of faith. In that way the previously referred to words of Paul ring true: Do not permit divisions among yourselves; be united in mind and thought.⁷⁸

The need for unity in doctrine that Bading espoused in his presidential address was put into action at that same convention. Recall the incident in 1854 concerning Pastor J. Sauer and his practices among the Reformed/Lutheran congregation in Slinger, Wisconsin. At the 1862 convention, the matter of Pastor Sauer accepting Missouri Synod members into his congregation was addressed, and it was resolved that he could, so long as they broke ties with the Missouri Synod. While investigating this matter, "it came to light that Pastor Sauer serves two congregations as a Lutheran pastor and one as a *Unirte* [United or Evangelical], but teaches the *Unirte* catechism and administers communion according to the Spindel formula, which beclouds Lutheran doctrine."⁷⁹ In light of this new information, the committee in charge of investigating the transfer of Missouri Synod members stated:

⁷⁸ Arnold Lehmann, trans., "1862 Proceedings, Wisconsin Ev. Luth. Synod," *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (April 1998): 5-6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

The committee asks that both this congregation as well as Pastor Sauer be given the time till August 1 to establish Lutheran doctrine and practice in that congregation as being the only correct one. Should both parties not be able to comply, should the congregation not be able to accept Lutheran doctrine and practice, or should Pastor Sauer not be willing to give up the congregation and the offense-giving doctrine and the serving of two confessions, it must then be clearly stated to both parties, that there is no room in our synod for non-Lutheran doctrine and practice. If by August both parties or one or the other party does not accept the required change that agrees with the doctrines of the synod, as indicated in the resolution, the respective party has to realize that it has separated itself from the synod.⁸⁰

What becomes clear when observing these proceedings is that Bading's emphasis on the Lutheran Confessions and doctrinal unity was gaining ground in the Wisconsin Synod. Others aided his efforts significantly, like Gottlieb Reim. At the 1861 synodical convention, Reim offered an essay defining the Wisconsin Synod's confessional position. In the essay, Reim detailed the young synod's historical attitude toward the confessions and concluded:

[The Wisconsin Synod's] foundation is based in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, exactly as established by the highly enlightened Reformers of the Lutheran Church and as adopted by the entire Lutheran Church and its adherents. It is free of all and every innovation of rationalistic, unionistically inclined and heterodox confession-bunglers and traitors. It acknowledges no altered *Augustana* nor the nonsense of the Modernists.⁸¹

Throughout the essay, Reim firmly espoused adherence to the Lutheran Confessions as symbols that properly expound Scripture, and even encouraged their investigation as such.

A survey of Wisconsin Synod history until the Civil War reveals a church body in the process of defining itself. Muehlhaeuser, Weinmann, and Wrede had founded the synod on the basis of the Lutheran Confessions, but clergy with mixed theological backgrounds serving congregations of mixed fellowships made the church body's official position difficult to determine. Its confessional stance on paper differed from its confessional stance in practice. As the young synod continued to establish itself in the 1850s, men like John Bading and Gottlieb Reim gradually focused attention on defining the Wisconsin Synod as a conservative and confessional church body. When the Civil War broke out, Bading served as the synod's

⁸⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁸¹ WELS HIJ, Vol. 14, No. 1: 4.

president, and his emphasis on doctrinal unity and the Lutheran Confessions would continue to shape the Wisconsin Synod.

Wisconsin Synod Reaction

Wisconsin formally entered statehood in 1848, only two years before the founding of the Wisconsin Synod. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the state of Wisconsin was far removed from the theater of the war, and had little to fear in the way of its crops being ravaged or homes destroyed. Still, the state was predominantly anti-slavery in its sentiments, and it eagerly declared for the Union, contributing plentiful men and supplies to putting down the Confederacy.

Thus, when the Wisconsin Synod formed in 1850, it was not born into an environment of political and societal upheaval due to impending conflict with neighboring states; rather, the synod was able to establish itself and concentrate on expansion in an environment of relative peace. In 1850, the synod boasted only five pastors and nine “preaching places.” By 1860, those numbers had respectively grown to twenty and fifty-nine, and growth would continue throughout the Civil War.⁸²

Did the Civil War have any effect on the young Wisconsin Synod? Did anti- and pro-slavery factions emerge? Was slavery even addressed? Did the synod develop a stance regarding a state’s right to secede from the Union? The best we can do to answer such questions is examine the minutes from synodical conventions in the 1850s and 1860s. Much gratitude is due to Arnold Lehmann, who translated these documents into English.

What surfaces in these minutes regarding the Civil War and its issues is sparse. There are references to the conflict, but specific mention of names, events, or issues connected with it are mostly lacking. Instead, these conventions addressed concerns more pressing to a young Lutheran synod trying to define itself, like an insufficient supply of pastors, how the Sacraments should be practiced, the rejection of Schmucker’s *Definite Platform*, and statements of adherence to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and the Lutheran Confessions.

One would suppose that with the secession of southern states in 1860 and the subsequent outbreak of war, the synod might address what was shaking the nation at that year’s convention.

⁸² Fredrich, 13.

It is possible that synod President Muehlhaeuser made a reference to the growing tensions with this statement: “If we glance at the political situation in the world we see how the sea of nations is roaring, and how the clandestine fear of coming events is ruling the atmosphere. In the old fatherland one speaks of peace, and yet no one trusts the assurance of peace; for everywhere new powerful preparations for bloody war are being made.”⁸³ Yet, references to “the political situation in the world,” “the sea of nations,” and “the old fatherland” make one hesitant to attribute Muehlhaeuser’s word entirely to the American scene.

In the May 1861 proceedings, President Bading seems to address America’s freshly started conflict:

What our experiences in the new synodical year will be we cannot as yet say. The time is evil, and for the natural eye the conditions are troubled. Satan is on the loose, and is determined to gather together the nations in conflict, chiefly against each other. Whether the days are near in which they will attack the beloved city of God and the camp of believers, we will have to wait and see.⁸⁴

Only two months after this convention met, Confederate forces fired on Fort Sumter and the Civil War formally began. It seems likely, then, that Bading has in mind with these words the trouble brewing to the east.

The 1862 convention called for prayers on behalf of a peaceful conclusion to the Civil War:

Considering the sad state in which our country finds itself, and that we also as a synod are guilty of participating in the same, that it is desirable for the synod to pass a special resolution. The following resolution was then made and adopted by the synod: Since, because of God’s wise counsel, our adopted fatherland is in such a sad state that the flames of Civil War have ignited the South and North, and since we are convinced that the authorities are from God, and whoever opposes them rejects God’s ordinances, and since we most humbly recognize this calamity to be a just punishment of our people, therefore,

⁸³ Arnold Lehmann, trans., “Proceedings of the Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin held in the church of the First Evangelical Lutheran Congregation in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin from May 31 to June 7, 1860 A.D.,” *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (October 1995): 5.

⁸⁴ Arnold Lehmann, trans., “Proceedings of the Eleventh Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin held in the church of Watertown and Vicinity, Wisconsin from May 25 to 31, 1861 A.D.,” *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (October 1995): 5.

Resolved, that we as a synod penitently humble ourselves and earnestly invoke Him to turn from us in grace the hand of His anger, and thereby give counsel and wisdom to our rulers, and in grace give our army the victory so that this unholy brother-war soon be brought to an end, that all bloody garb be burned, that the spears be turned into sickles and swords into plowshares, and that the flag of peace may fly in the North and South of our fatherland.⁸⁵

Interesting is the Wisconsin Synod's assertion that the war is "a just punishment of our people," a sentiment echoed by other Christians who felt the war to be God's judgment upon the increasingly immoral and wicked American culture. Also of note is the phrase "and in grace give our army the victory." Undoubtedly this refers to the Union army, which the Wisconsin Synod supplied with volunteers and draftees.

The 1863 convention took place in Milwaukee, concurrent with battle of Chancellorsville, in which Confederate General Robert E. Lee defeated a numerically superior Union army, but lost his most talented officer, Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. As hostilities between North and South continued to increase, so did Bading continue to speak more and more passionately concerning it. In his 1863 address, President Bading once again ascribed the war to God's judgment on American impiety. He likewise made it apparent that the Wisconsin Synod was contributing members to the war effort:

The experiences in our political civil life must freely make us bow down and grieve. In the matters of our torn, heavily afflicted country things have become more troubled and more gloomy. The noble efforts of our people were not in a position to suppress rebellion which is destroying all social relations of this land. . . . How can it be otherwise? How can our people expect anything but severe affliction? Did it not for a long time already practice idolatry with the land's might, freedom and wealth? Does not unbelief and mockery of holy matters, lies and deceits, perjury and contempt of God's and man's ordinances in all areas of the country provoke the ire and vengeance of the holy and just? Now the Lord has come with a terrible judgment against our people to make them pay fully for their sinful conduct. The bloody civil war has raged already two years. The past year has again cast thousands of men and youth into the arms of death and led these immortal souls into eternity. There is hardly a congregation in our synod that does not have some of its members on the field of battle.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ WELS HIJ, Vol. 16, No. 1: 19.

⁸⁶ Arnold Lehmann, trans., "Proceedings of the Thirteenth Convention of the German Evangel.-Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and other States held in the Church of the Evangel.-Lutheran Grace Congregation in Milwaukee, Wis. from May 29 to June 3, 1863," *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (October 1998): 42-43.

By the May 1864 convention held in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, Lee had been defeated at Gettysburg and the tide of war was beginning to shift in the Union's favor. Vice-president Gottlieb Reim addressed those gathered, stressing the importance of preaching the gospel and approaching God with prayer:

Three years of our bloody civil war have passed. The lives of thousands have been snatched away by war, and also in our congregations families are grieved at the loss of loved ones. Still the end of this war is not in sight, and while we are gathered here peacefully considering our church's matters, the slaughter continues unabated. The sad thing is that our people in general do not recognize the hand that causes it, and do not submit to the holy and just judgment of God. Isn't it also our calling to participate in the political problems of the day; it is even more our duty to inform the people, on the one hand, of the only true way to peace, namely sincere repentance and humility before God, but also, on the other hand, to inform them how once Abraham, Moses and others approached God with priestly prayers.⁸⁷

The June 1865 convention met a little over two months after Lee formally surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia to General Grant at the village of Appomattox Court House, Virginia, thus effectively ending hostilities between North and South. The presidential report read at this convention reviewed the war's horrors and encouraged thankfulness for its end:

It was a difficult and sad time when we departed from Manitowoc last year. Being hostage to a terrible bloody civil war lay heavily on our people and on the congregations of our synod. Many faithful congregation members hastened into the ranks of the fighting men. Fathers left their families behind, sons their parents, and many a message of sorrow was the last report of the departed. We could not conceal it from ourselves to continue to suffer such affliction, and there was the danger that everything would get completely out of hand, and that peaceful growth of the church and our synod was a thing of the past. We as a synod had no [divine] call to participate in the political matters of the day. Our only comfort, our only hope in these terrible hours of the past and current synodical years was: "the right hand of the Lord can alter everything," and we were not destroyed because of our action. He commanded the storm of the battle, and to the amazement of our people and all people the war was silenced. That has to move us to offer our thanks to the Lord at the start of this year's convention for giving our people a time of grace.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Arnold Lehmann, trans., "Proceedings of the Fourteenth Convention of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States held in the First German Evangelical Lutheran Congregation in Manitowoc Wisc.," *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (October 1999): 6.

The Wisconsin Synod was at this time excited about its newly established seminary. The 1865 convention revealed that the Civil War had, however, hindered the seminary, primarily when it came to the collecting of donations. Professor E. Moldehnke reported:

After suffering a shortage of pastors and teachers for so many years, and after yearning for a seminary, often discussed and resolved and even collected for with difficulties in foreign lands, every interested person justly looks forward to an active participation and renewed enthusiasm for our finally established seminary, at least in our own synodical circles. Certainly many of our pastors and congregations supported this very important work most zealously. In a supplement we are reporting with sincere thanks the liberal contributions of friendly donors. But we must realize that our expectations were not reached. To a great degree the blame lies on the severely depressed war conditions.... During the course of the winter the professor [i.e., E. Moldehnke] went on three collection trips – to Kilbourn Road, to Racine and to Fond du Lac. At these three places he did not come away empty. Other trips were not possible for various reasons. Along with this there was the pending call-up of the troops and the pressing war conditions. So he stopped collecting and sought to work for the seminary through personal acquaintances, negotiations and clearing up of misunderstandings.⁸⁹

The convention also saw fit to address the assassination of President Lincoln, which occurred only six days after Lee's surrender: "The committee ... [feels] that thanks be given to our gracious God, who has led everything so favorably this past year, even though we have to bow our heads because of the tragic attack on President Lincoln."⁹⁰

Synodical proceedings prior to and during the Civil War reveal that the Wisconsin Synod was aware of and concerned over the state of its nation. Its fathers and sons joined the war effort, fighting and dying on bloody battlefields in Lincoln's Union army. It joined the general cry of sorrow and despair for a nation torn asunder and loved ones slain. It bemoaned the death of an honest and hardworking man from Illinois, whose unenviable position it was to guide his nation through four years of bloodshed. It trusted the hand of God to be present through it all, in both judgment and mercy. Beyond this, the Wisconsin Synod appears to have had little interest in voicing its opinion concerning the issues surrounding the war. No mention is made of slavery;

⁸⁸ Arnold Lehmann, trans., "Proceedings of the 15th Convention of the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and Other States held in the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Watertown, Wis., June 22 to 28, 1865," *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (October 1996): 9.

⁸⁹ WELS HIJ, Vol. 14, No. 2: 14-15.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

no verdict on secession is given. What resounds instead, when the war is even mentioned, is a plea before God for quick and peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Lutheran Reactions Explained

Regarding history, it is often the case that “what” is more easily discerned than “why.” *What* happened can be gleaned from documents and eyewitness accounts contemporary to the period and event under consideration. Now and then eyewitnesses will disagree or documentation will prove insufficient, but posterity has often preserved an accurate picture of *what* happened in the past, at least concerning the timeframe under consideration in this paper.

Why history occurred in the way it did can prove a trickier matter. As an example, consider the events that took place on one of the Civil War’s most famous battlefields. In early July 1863 General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia clashed with Union forces at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, a battle that many feel marked the final decline of the South. A key moment occurred in the battle on its third day when Lee sought to capture an area firmly held by entrenched Union forces. He ordered the famed (and defamed) “Pickett’s Charge,” a collaborative rush of Confederate forces upon the Union lines, one that even the assault’s commanding officer predicted to be futile. The charge resulted in heavy losses and the eventual defeat of Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia.

Here is a case where *what* happened is fairly clear: Lee ordered an assault on a heavily guarded Union position, suffered severe casualties, and was defeated. *Why* it happened, on the other hand, remains unclear, both to Lee’s contemporaries and to many historians. Why did General Lee, the mastermind of Chancellorsville and Second Manassas, the jewel of the Confederacy, order an attack that was almost sure to fail? Why send his men on a death march into enemy fortifications after personally witnessing Union General Ambrose Burnside make the same mistake at the Battle of Fredericksburg? Why, with his foot firmly planted in Northern soil, did Lee seemingly throw it all away with a plan that would appear foolhardy to even the freshest of recruits? Many have offered their opinions, but there is no clear answer. The “what” of history can often be determined, but the “why” is less tangible.

Perhaps it is wise to keep this in mind as we attempt to discern why the Lutheran church bodies under consideration reacted the way they did to the Civil War and its issues. We have set

out to hold a hypothesizer's lens over the pages of history, but this comes with the understanding that speculation is part of the process.

After reviewing the histories of the General Synod, the Missouri Synod, and the Wisconsin Synod, this author believes that two factors come to the fore regarding how each synod responded to the nation's conflict: geographical location and the level of doctrinal unity maintained within each respective synod.

One of the more severe reactions to the Civil War was the General Synod's split in 1863. Its southern members retracted their membership and formed the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Confederate States of America. But why this split when the Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Synod, and other Lutheran church bodies remained intact?

The simplest and most obvious answer concerns the General Synod's geographical makeup. The General Synod contained member synods throughout the East, and when war broke out, it was natural that these synods would feel some affinity for their native states, just like General Lee, who was offered command of the Union army, but turned it down in an effort to remain loyal to his home state of Virginia and thus the cause of the Confederacy.

It must also be noted that the creation of a southern General Synod did not come about because of debate over the issue of slavery – at least that was not its primary cause. Rather, fiery rhetoric from the General Synod denouncing southern rebellion and secession was a more prominent catalyst. With their Lutheran brethren in the North deeming these activities as “wicked ... unjustified ... unnatural ... inhuman ... oppressive ... and destructive” to “morality and religion,”⁹¹ it was only natural that the southern members of the General Synod would see in this a condemnation of their own society, culture, and perhaps even religious practice. Thus, were it not the case that the General Synod had members in both Union and Confederate states, a break of this nature would likely not have occurred. It seems that the schism was at its core a matter of geography.

Yet, it could be argued that geographical location alone should not have been enough to split the General Synod. One might think that a religious institution would be immune to the political factors that were dividing the nation, at least to some degree. Should not common goals and beliefs have banded the General Synod together in that time of trial, despite its members being scattered throughout the nation?

⁹¹ Nelson, 243.

Perhaps therein lies another prominent issue that contributed to the General Synod's split. The General Synod *had no united doctrinal stance*; its members all held to the Lutheran Confessions to some degree or another, but wholesale unity was lacking. At its founding, the synod sought to welcome "any movement looking toward 'concord and unity' of Christians 'of whatever kind or denomination.'" ⁹² Its most prominent theologian, Samuel Simon Schmucker, promoted this sentiment by stressing the importance of agreement in "fundamental doctrines" over and above what would have been considered doctrines of secondary or peripheral importance. He even viewed the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as insufficient to represent Lutherans in America, and sought to change it.

Such a doctrinal stance resulted in what one might call surface fellowship. The General Synod maintained a shallow unity comprised of Lutheran church bodies with similar, but not the same, attitudes toward the Lutheran Confessions and thus God's Word. With this being the case, one can ask: What was really holding the General Synod together? Was it simply the desire to see a unified Lutheran Church in America? Was it merely the name "Lutheran?" One can even speculate on more pertinent questions: Would a split within the General Synod have ever occurred if it was truly united in doctrine? Would not the bond between its member synods have been stronger if they held a common confession, rather than just a common title?

Absolute answers to such questions will never be had, but the Missouri Synod's response to the Civil War and its issues leads this author to believe that doctrinal unity could have played a leading role in preventing the General Synod's schism.

The Missouri Synod was headquartered in a border state during the Civil War, and was exposed early on to the conflicting sympathies the war produced. The state's native population was mostly pro-Southern, but an influx of German Lutherans provided a balance in sentiment. One of the war's earliest conflicts (the Camp Jackson Affair) took place almost on the doorstep of the Missouri Synod's seminary in St. Louis, causing its most prominent leader to send his wife and children outside the city for safety. The state of Missouri would see no relief as the war dragged on; the neutral state saw numerous battles as North and South struggled for control in the war's western theater.

⁹².Ferm, 39.

Why then was the Missouri Synod able to weather the political and societal storm that beat upon its parent state? We have observed that at least shadows of pro-South and pro-North sentiments within the Missouri Synod made themselves known as the war progressed, so why did no decisive split occur like it did in the General Synod?

Again, the influence of geographical location must be mentioned, though it seems to have played a much smaller role in determining the actions of the Missouri Synod than it did in that of the General Synod. It is true that the Missouri Synod was headquartered in a border state and was thus exposed to strong elements of support from both North and South, but lack of a prevailing opinion allowed the synod to remain officially neutral with little fallout. Walther and Concordia Seminary are reported to have received “threats” for his stance concerning slavery and secession,⁹³ though these were not enough to cause wholesale division. Had the Missouri Synod been headquartered in a state loyal to one side in the war, it seems that the conditions would have been riper for schism with those loyal to the other side. As it stood, however, the Missouri Synod’s geographical location allowed them to leave the question of “Whose side are we on?” unanswered.

Just as important to the Missouri Synod’s preservation prior to and during the Civil War was its doctrinal unity. Walther and the Löhe men who founded the Missouri Synod initially came together because they shared a love for the Lutheran Confessions as proper exposition of the Word of God. Such convictions remained prevalent in the young Missouri Synod as it grew, and these same convictions provided a bond tight enough to withstand the national upheaval that was fast approaching.

Thus, when certain members or parties of the synod did voice potentially disagreeable opinions on the issues pertaining to the Civil War, no lasting discord resulted. Some clergy certainly disagreed with Walther when he upheld the institution of slavery and degraded radical abolitionism in *Lehre und Wehre*; the Concordia Seminary faculty even became split over the issue. Some may even have taken offence when the students at Concordia Seminary formed their own Union regiment in St. Louis during the Camp Jackson Affair. Yet, these events and others like them were not enough to drive a lasting wedge into the Missouri Synod ranks.

Why? Because the Missouri Synod was held together by something much stronger than mere political ideology. It fully recognized the moral and religious implications that went hand-

⁹³ Nelson, 163.

in-hand with slavery and secession, but it also recognized a far more impactful Scriptural truth, one echoed by the Lutheran Confessions, “The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly.”⁹⁴ In the eyes of the Missouri Synod and its leaders, the church was not comprised of only abolitionists, or only anti-abolitionists; it did not contain only Unionists or only Confederates; God did not favor the Democrat over the Republican, or *vice versa*. In fact, rather than embroil itself in such political affairs, Walther advised, “Let us prove [in our actions] that as good *Lutherans* we are indeed also good *citizens*. Let us in accord with Paul’s admonition genuinely ‘be subject to the higher powers, which rule over us.’”⁹⁵

Thus, as the Civil War and its issues confronted the Missouri Synod, it was able to maintain a distinction between its role as a church body and what was causing upheaval in the nation. Firm confessional convictions prompted the synod to advocate faithful citizenship to the governing power, whether that power be from the North or the South. When disagreement did occur concerning what was ravaging the nation, the Missouri Synod ultimately rested on united belief concerning God and his Word. Any bickering that occurred over political and societal issues in the contested state of Missouri was unable to tear apart an organization that had at its foundation a common confession. Perhaps if the General Synod had been able to present before the Civil War such a united doctrinal front, it would have enjoyed the Missouri Synod’s level of preservation.

Unlike the General Synod and the Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Synod offered little in the way of response to the Civil War, and once again, geographical location is an important factor. Headquartered in Wisconsin, the church body was relatively far removed from the theater of war and political aggression. All around it were states loyal to the Union, so no political or societal “tug of war” threatened to divide either the state or the synod. The state of Wisconsin naturally echoed the political opinion of the states surrounding it. Such one-sided loyalty prompted the Wisconsin Synod to support the North’s war efforts at synod conventions, and many of its members even fought on Civil War battlefields, almost certainly for the North.

⁹⁴ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 43.

⁹⁵ Meyer, 235-236.

Yet, despite Northern loyalties, the Wisconsin Synod did little in the way of voicing opinion concerning the bigger issues of the war. Nowhere on record are there statements either condemning or condoning such things as slavery or secession. Certainly this is partly due to geographical isolation from the theater of war; there was no need to make such statements, because there was no person or situation demanding them.

It seems, however, that another factor played just as prominent a role in the Wisconsin Synod's laconic attitude toward the Civil War. Only 11 years before shots were fired at Fort Sumter in 1861, men from German mission societies formed the Wisconsin Synod. The intervening years saw the young synod struggle to define itself. It was founded on the basis of the Lutheran Confessions, but its congregations and even its leaders remained somewhat ambiguous toward such principles. "New Lutheran" and Reformed attitudes worked side-by-side with "Old Lutheran" and strictly confessional attitudes, resulting in a murky religious landscape in the Wisconsin Synod's early years. Even though this plurality existed, the "Old Lutheran" portion remained dominant in number and influence. From the time the synod was formed in 1850, these men worked toward unifying the synod under the standard of the Lutheran Confessions. The synod was far larger and far more confessional by the time the Civil War broke out in 1861. Yet, despite this, synod convention meetings from those years reveal that there was still work to be done.

It becomes clear that in the years prior to and during the Civil War the Wisconsin Synod had more pressing issues to deal with than those concerning its country. It recognized what was happening farther south and east and offered up prayers for the war's swift conclusion, but we find no fiery reactions concerning the issues that led to war. This is because the Wisconsin Synod was concerned instead with turning its doctrinal ambiguity into doctrinal unity.

Thus we see a plausible explanation of *why* the Wisconsin Synod reacted to the Civil War and its issues. Geographical location effectively removed them from the theater of war, severely negating the effect that the war's pressing questions had. Also, any disagreement that may have arisen was further negated by the fact that the young synod was at that time waging an internal struggle to define itself as a confessional Lutheran church body, one united in doctrine and practice.

Conclusion

This author hopes that two factors have become apparent regarding Lutheran reaction to the Civil War and its issues: geographical location and doctrinal unity.

The first, geographical location, was without doubt primary in determining how the synods under examination reacted. Had the General Synod not been spread throughout both Northern and Southern territories, it is much less likely that a split would have occurred. Had the Missouri Synod not been located in a border state, it seems likely that many of the issues they did face could have been avoided. Had the Wisconsin Synod shared the locations of either the General Synod or the Missouri Synod, it likely would have had a much more vocal and perhaps detrimental reaction to the Civil War.

As it stood, though, each synod's unique geographical location prompted a unique reaction: the General Synod was exposed to differing societal and political opinions, and it divided; the Missouri Synod was forced to weather neutrality, and it remained intact; the Wisconsin Synod was placed in a position where it was necessary to say very little about the war, and it remained intact.

Also prominent in these synods' reactions to the Civil War were their respective levels of doctrinal unity.

The General Synod maintained a shallow unity based on loose adherence to the Lutheran Confessions. When the strife of civil conflict confronted the synod's scattered members, simply having the name "Lutheran" was not enough to maintain fellowship; political and societal affairs trumped the lesser degree of doctrinal unity that was maintained, and the synod split.

The Missouri Synod, on the other hand, strived for and maintained a high level of doctrinal unity within its congregations. Whatever differing political attitudes existed were not able to undermine the united biblical and confessional foundation that Walther and the synod's other leaders worked to create.

The Wisconsin Synod differed from both the General Synod and the Missouri Synod regarding doctrinal unity. Prior to and during the Civil War this synod was in the process of defining its doctrinal stance. Nonetheless, it can be said with certainty that the Wisconsin Synod was striving toward doctrinal unity, and maintaining the status quo of doctrinal ambiguity would likely have been a catalyst in promoting division in the future.

With the “what” of history laid before the reader, it is this author’s hope that the “why” has been sufficiently, or at least plausibly, explained. It is also hoped that this information has proved applicable to today’s American scene. The United States seems ever on the verge of war or engaged in one already, and though every conflict since the nineteenth century has taken place far from her soil, that is not to say that a more local conflict is far away. Newsreels and Internet pages abound with stories that seem to harken impending, large-scale bloodshed. Racial tensions are ever rising; polemic debate between liberal and conservative factions grows more venomous after each election; even the different geographic regions of America have their own respective agendas. Is it impossible that the United States could once again find itself waging internal war?

Should such devastation occur, perhaps we will remember our Lutheran ancestors who faced a similar struggle in the 1860s. We will remember that great national conflict can lead to great religious conflict, that a widespread church, though admirable and desirable, is also vulnerable. Pray that we remember what does *not* unify a body of believers; it is not likeminded politics, nor agreement on every social issue, and it is certainly not a matter of proximity. Pray also that we remember and cherish what *does* unify Christians into one accord: unified belief in the Christ, the Son of God, the cornerstone of the Church, a foundation that will weather any storm, civil or foreign, from now until eternity.

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