

A TURN FOR THE WORSE

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The 1930's: a decade of depression, filled with financial ruin for many, with a sense of hopelessness, helplessness and extreme poverty for many others; a decade of desolation, of natural disasters, dustbowls, massive crop failures, and the like; a decade of rising despots, of Hitler flexing the collective muscle of the German populace, of Mussolini firing the nationalistic spirit of Italy. The 1930's: not one of the happier times of the present century. In fact, to the casual observer, the 1930's was a decade in which many facets of life that we deem vitally necessary, many facets that we dearly treasure were severely threatened. It was a period of time in which the situation in general took a turn for the worse.

"A Turn for the Worse." That phrase not only sums up the general flow of events on the world level during the 1930's, but it also depicts the insidious and far-more dangerous turn of thought, of teaching, of doctrine that could be found in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod during this same period of time. For it was during the 1930's, that the Missouri Synod forsook its former position on church fellowship, leaving behind its conservative belief that there can be no true union of church bodies without there first being a true and complete union in doctrine, a union that then evidences itself in practice. What brought about this change, a change that opened the floodgates for the tidal wave of problems that have since beset the Missouri Synod? It is that question that this paper will endeavor to answer, by exploring several hypothetical causes for Missouri's

"Turn for the worse."

In order to better understand any proposed causes for Missouri's change of thought on church fellowship, it becomes advisable first of all to briefly sketch the change that did occur. From its inception, the Missouri Synod had been based upon the premise that reine Lehre, purity of doctrine, was of the first and foremost importance.<sup>1</sup> It was such a burning desire and zeal for pure doctrine that led those first Saxons, under the guidance of Stephan, to leave all that was near and dear to them, and to conduct their own religious exodus from Germany in November of 1838.<sup>2</sup> It is not at all hard to understand that the same people, who treasured pure doctrine so highly that they left their own homeland to ensure the survival of that doctrine, would also staunchly defend that doctrine once they had arrived in their promised land.

And so it was that the young Missouri Synod, under the guidance of such eminent theologians as C.F.W. Walther, and later Francis Pieper, continued to tenaciously cling to her reine Lehre. However, such a stance did not at all preclude another basic tenet of the Missouri Synod. From its inception, this synod also recognized the true importance of true, Scriptural unity among Christians.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the Missouri Synod was

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Arnold Kuster, The Fellowship Dispute in the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod: A Rhetorical Study of Ecumenical Change. (Madison, WI.: Thomas Arnold Kuster, 1969) , p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>Walter O. Forster, Zion on the Mississippi (Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), p. 192.

<sup>3</sup>Kuster, op. cit., p. 24.

not at all content to stick its head into the sand and pray that the rest of the religious community would simply pass it by. On the contrary, under the energetic guidance of Walther, this synod continually sought to establish ties with other Lutheran groups in the U.S. Therefore in the Missouri Synod (prior to the 1930's), a sincere desire for purity of doctrine and also for true, Scriptural unity went hand-in-hand. Both received their proper, equal emphasis.

That, however, changed in the 1930's. For at that time a desire for unity among Lutherans, especially between the Missouri and the Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo Synods, began to outweigh doctrinal considerations. How can we say this? We can adduce as proof for the previous statement the 1938 Union Resolutions of the Missouri Synod Convention of that year. To be sure, the wording of those resolutions can in and of itself be understood correctly.<sup>4</sup> However, the very fact that those resolutions were ever presented indicates an overly eager attitude on the part of the Synodical leaders to further the union effort with the ALC. Furthermore those resolutions also betray some rather disquieting thinking that was going on especially on the Committee level. That thinking centered around what was termed "non-fundamental doctrines." Briefly stated, there were those in the Missouri Synod who did not feel that certain doctrines of Scripture need be divisive of church fellowship. In other words, they betrayed a willingness to sell out part of the reine

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<sup>4</sup>Walter A. Baepler, A Century of Grace (Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), p.321-323.

Lehre in exchange for unionism.

Why? What enabled such an insidious "turn for the worse" ever to present itself? We would humbly suggest the following reasons, (given not necessarily in order of importance).

First of all, Missouri's turn for the worse was facilitated in part by the unofficial publications floating about that Synod. How so? Consider especially the American Lutheran, a publication begun in 1918 under the guidance of Paul Lindemann, a pastor in New Jersey.<sup>5</sup> This publication began innocently enough as a forum determined to better what was deemed the poor public image of the Missouri Synod. Its primary thrust was to be practical, and it sought to concentrate on "practical methods of local church expansion."<sup>6</sup> However, over the course of years, especially by the 1930's, the American Lutheran began to be a forum in which to air criticism of the Synod, a forum in which to agitate for change within the Synod. That such an emphasis was indeed to be found in this publication is borne out by the following excerpt from a "Plan" for the American Lutheran.

It seems useless to hope for official action regarding constructive changes. Official action toward rectification of our organizational weaknesses can be brought about evidently only by pressure from below, through the insistence of conferences, congregations, pastors, and groups of laymen. . . Perhaps the directive influence towards the rehabilitation of our church life should come from above, but we feel that at the present time this directive influence will not be exerted unless it is compelled by sentiment from the rank and file. It is the creation of this sentiment that we have in mind.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Kuster, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>6</sup>Kuster, op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>7</sup>Kuster, op. cit., p. 52.

We see in these words an obvious agitation for change within the Missouri Synod, of that there can be no doubt. However, we also see in these words something a bit more disturbing, and that is this. It appears that Lindemann and the others involved with the American Lutheran have given up hope on the leaders of the Synod. They are convinced that those leaders can give no new meaningful direction to their Synod, and therefore they are taking upon themselves that leadership through this publication.

So what? Is it wrong to be discontented with Synodical hierarchy? (If it were, the "ragged" individualism of the Wisconsin Synod would have to come under the harshest criticism.) No, discontent in itself is not wrong. It is, perhaps, quite inevitable. However, it does seem wrong, or at the very least ill-advised, to publish such discontent in a public forum for all to see. This, it would appear, can lead to a breakdown in morale, to a breakdown in discipline. Such unofficial publications can certainly sway the public. They may well be able to sow seeds of discontent also among the weaker brethren to be found among the clergy. And so, such unofficial publications, if left unchecked, if left undisciplined, can lead to chaos, can lead to everything being done indecently and out of order. Therefore, it is our belief that the American Lutheran played a part in Missouri's turn for the worse. It made possible, at least in a small way, the nagging question in the back of every clergyman's mind, "Is my Synod correct in its doctrinal stance? Is its position on church fellowship the correct one?" Sad to

say, the rest of the American Lutheran religious community was ready and eager to respond with the answer, "No, you're wrong. Why not look at things our way for a change?"

"A Turn for the Worse." It may well have been facilitated in part by doubt, by uncertainty as to whether or not the traditional position of the Missouri Synod on the matter of church fellowship was the correct one. Yet such doubt, brought about by unofficial publications within the Synod, is only one of several causes for Missouri's turn for the worse.

Another cause for Missouri's turn for the worse seems to be completely incompatible with the one just mentioned. Esprit de corps: loyalty to Synod. Just as there were those who questioned and doubted the Synod and its leadership, there were also those ( a majority in fact) who had complete faith, trust, and loyalty in Synod. Their loyalty was not necessarily directed to a particular doctrinal position. These loyal men, both laymen and pastors, did not necessarily fully comprehend the proper balance between reine Lehre and proper unity. But these men did know what it meant to be loyal to Synod. And when that Synod made a decision, "as it had in the 1938 Union Resolutions, that decision deserved loyal support."<sup>8</sup>

What made possible such loyal, and at the same time, such blind support of the Synod's position? Obviously, it was indoctrination, indoctrination that began in the grade schools, that continued on the high school and college level, and that

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<sup>8</sup>Kuster, op. cit., p. 80.

culminated on the Seminary level. Therefore, when analyzing the causes for Missouri's turn for the worse in the 1930's, it is also necessary to consider the Synod's training program. In particular, it is necessary to evaluate just what was happening at Saint Louis.

No doubt, the professors at Concordia Theological Seminary during the 1930's would have been the last to dream that they may well have played a part in Missouri's change in thought and doctrine. Any idea of change, of innovation seemed quite foreign to the main emphasis of Concordia during those days. Instead, conservation and confessionalism were given the maximum emphasis.<sup>9</sup> The Professors at Concordia were "determined, first of all, to be faithful to the Scriptures as they understood them, guarding the Lutheran heritage that they had, and underscoring it in their contributions to the church periodicals for the rank and file of the members."<sup>10</sup> Such determination to be faithful to the Scriptures is certainly praiseworthy. However, it would appear that the conservatism of these Seminary professors was slightly misdirected. An undue emphasis on following the footsteps of the fathers and of their faith seems to be discernible. Instead of tirelessly searching the Scriptures and endeavoring to make its truths its own, this group of professors (e.g. A.L. Graebner, F. Bente)

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<sup>9</sup>Carl S. Meyer, Log Cabin to Luther Tower (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), p.92.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 92.



emphasized research into the past and a concern for the writings of the early fathers of the Synod. Such an emphasis and concern shows itself quite clearly in the title and main parts of an essay that F. Bente delivered at the convention of the Missouri Synod in Fort Wayne in June, 1923. That essay was entitled, "Following the Faith of Our Fathers," and in that essay, Bente gave this encouragement: "Let Us Follow our Fathers in Their Confessional Loyalty"; "Let Us Follow our Fathers in Their Firm Adherence to the Inspiration and Inerrancy of the Bible."<sup>11</sup> One statement in particular from Bente's essay strikes one's attention: "Accordingly, dear brethren, if we shall but continue to walk in the steps of our fathers, God will continue to bless us even as our fathers."<sup>12</sup> Granted, Bente's words can be understood properly, and the sentiment behind them can be wholeheartedly accepted. However, when these words are viewed as but a part of the overall emphasis of Concordia Seminary during those days, one has to wonder whether or not a sort of blind mimicking of the Father's faith was beginning to take its toll in the Synod. Is it possible, that these fine professors, capable men though they were, became so obsessed with the fact that they were not deviating by "a hair's breadth from the old Lutheran position," they they no longer really knew why, on the basis of Scripture, they held to those Old Lutheran positions?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

Perhaps it is saying far too much to say that the Professors themselves had lost a firm grasp on the living truth of the Scriptures. But is it possible, that by their undue emphasis upon upholding the tradition of the Fathers, they instilled in their students, in the next generation of Missouri Synod pastors, a sort of blind loyalty to the past, that esprit de corps of which we spoke earlier? If such was indeed the case, it is not at all surprising that many of Missouri's rank-and-file simply went along with the '38 Union Resolutions. Nor is it surprising that there were some who forsook the old Missouri ways, who gave in to the enticements of unionism, of ecumenism, simply because these men had not grasped for themselves the Scriptural doctrines involved.

Why did Missouri take a "turn for the worse" in the 1930's? In the previous pages of this paper, we have explored some of main causes, at least as we see them. Other causes may well have played a part. There are some who maintain that the change of presidency in 1935 affected the Missouri Synod a great deal. To be sure, in this time of tumult and pressure, Missouri's change of leadership may well have played a role in her change of position on church fellowship. Just when Missouri may well have needed strong leadership the most, she lost the aging hardliner, President Pfoth. In his place, she received a kindly, gentle Texan, John W. Bencken.<sup>14</sup> Coupled with the loss of President Pfoth, was, four years earlier the death

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<sup>14</sup>Eldon Weisheit, The Zeal of His House (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), p. 90.

of Francis Pieper, the able dogmatician and President of Concordia Theological Seminary. Surely the loss of both of these men had its effect on the future course of the Synod. However, by itself the loss of a few leaders could not have led to Missouri's downfall. That downfall could only come about as a result of the several interacting causes that have been thus far proposed in this paper.

So what's the point? Why attempt to capsulize several apparent causes for Missouri's turn for the worse in the 1930's? Not simply as an historical exercise. Not simply to tear off the scabs of old wounds that are slow in healing, and disgusting to look at. No, the purpose must be far different. The purpose must be, instead, instruction for the present generation. Such a study as this one must shout a stern warning both to the professors and to the students of the Wisconsin Synod of the 1980's. For the dangers and the pressures upon us are just as great, if not greater, than those upon the Missouri Synod in the '30's. The temptation to join the crowd, to give in to the majority is definitely a strong one. It is a temptation that cannot be withstood simply by appealing to the teaching and faith of the fathers. Nor can such temptations long be withstood by apathy and indifference! Instead our position, our Wisconsin Synod Lutheran heritage can be preserved only by a firm stance on the teaching of our Heavenly Father, of His Son Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit. For it is this Divine Three-in-One that gives us this enduring command: "Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

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