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Table of Contents

Seminex: Looking In from the Outside

Mark Braun 291

Gospel Reductionism: Then and Now

David P. Scaer 323

Caesar Jesus? The Kingship of Jesus and Political Authorities in Luke and Acts

Kendall A. Davis 347

Theological Observer 367

Holding Fast to a Lamp Shining in a Dark Place

Book Reviews 371

Books Received 381

Indices to Volume 88 (2024) 383

Seminex: Looking In from the Outside

Mark Braun

The term “Bone-cruncher” may no longer mean anything to students at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, but the experiences connected to that term were deeply imprinted on those who attended the seminary generations ago. Bone-cruncher was an event typically held on the first Saturday night in March each year to welcome members of the Northwestern College (NWC) senior class who were planning to become first-year seminarians in the fall.¹ The entertainment for each year’s Bone-cruncher included the singing (good and bad) of quartets, a mock exegesis of a purportedly significant text, and a basketball game between college and seminary teams. However, as the evening progressed, the seniors soon realized that they themselves would become the central focus of the entertainment. At the Bone-cruncher evening meal, the place setting for each Northwestern senior was a piece of bone—selected from skeletal remains generously donated by a local butcher—with one’s name attached. The bigger the bone with your name on it, the more vigorously you could expect to be initiated into the student body at its next welcoming event, to be held after school started in September: *Gemuettlicher Abend*, or “GA.”

I did not consider my college years to be notable for any sort of rowdy behavior that would have called for stern disciplinary measures, but I had dropped out of college for a year, which meant that most of the first-year seminarians had been my classmates at Northwestern Preparatory School and during our freshman year in college. Now they were a year ahead of me and looking forward to a reunion at Bone-cruncher. My place setting was a thick block of bovine shoulder blade. Dinner service had barely begun when one of my former classmates demanded that I stand up and explain to “the body” why I had not worn a necktie that evening. (I was the only person there without a tie.) I replied with a somewhat sarcastic, disrespectful answer. My response provoked a guttural male roar—similar to the sound I imagine rose from the Roman hippodrome as Christians were paraded for execution. I could not tell if “the body” thought my comment was daring or disgusting. But above the growl I heard one voice distinctly: “Send him to St. Louis!”

¹ Northwestern College was an educational institution of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod located in Watertown, Wisconsin. It merged with Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, in 1995.

The date of that Bone-cruncher evening was Saturday, March 2, 1974—eleven days after the walkout at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

Time magazine reported that “outwardly, the tailored lawns and brown Gothic buildings” at Concordia gave “every evidence of serenity,” and that its very name was Latin for “serenity.” Yet “the largest Lutheran seminary in the world (690 students) was closed down by a student and faculty boycott.”² What was happening at Concordia looked all too much like the many anti-war protests that had been occurring on university campuses for almost a decade, but this action of faculty and students was provoked not by a far-off civil war or the loss of young American lives overseas but by disagreements over biblical interpretation, the limits of ecclesiastical authority, and the place of the institutional church in the modern world.

This event was momentous for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), but its shock waves rippled far beyond it, to other Lutheran church bodies that not many years earlier had been in doctrinal fellowship with the LCMS and had looked up to Missouri as their dependable “big sister.”³ As 2024 marks the half-century anniversary of that event, it is appropriate for the LCMS to examine its causes and effects. But I hope it will also be helpful for those of us in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) who were watching from the outside to recall those days, and for you to hear what we saw, heard, and thought.

The Past as Prologue

Missouri Synod historians have explained that the walkout did not occur suddenly or spontaneously but was the result of actions decades in the making.⁴ Wisconsin Synod and Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) observers also recounted the changes they saw occurring.⁵

² “Discord at Concordia,” *Time*, February 4, 1974, 54.

³ In this article, the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod are sometimes referred to simply as “Missouri” and “Wisconsin.”

⁴ Kurt Marquart *Anatomy of an Explosion: Missouri in Lutheran Perspective* (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977), 1, wrote that the events that occurred in the 1970s in the Missouri Synod “cannot be understood without knowing something of what has gone before.” He detailed how “looser views of biblical authority, inspiration, and inerrancy were held already prior to World War I by individual theologians in the Iowa Synod, the General Council, and especially in the General Synod” and were spreading into the LCMS (101–139). Matthew Harrison observed that “the agitation and protest that broke out within the LCMS during the 1970s had been building for more than fifty years,” as far back as anti-German sentiment against a German-Lutheran church body during World War I and the desire to present Lutheranism in a more positive light (introduction to *Rediscovering the Issues Surrounding the 1974 Concordia Seminary Walkout*, ed. Ken Schurb [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2023], 2).

⁵ See Gaylin R. Schmelting, “A Brief History of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 58, nos. 2 & 3 (June and September 2018): 182. The LCMS had been “the bastion of orthodoxy throughout the world. Yet in the 1930s the mighty defense began to crumble. In 1935,

David Schmiel has written that the casual observer in the 1850s “would hardly have imagined two more disparate groups of Lutherans than the Wisconsin and Missouri synods.”⁶ Wisconsin’s premier dogmatician, Adolf Hoenecke, once remarked to John P. Koehler, future professor and historian, that there was “something sectarian” about the Missouri Synod.⁷ More than seven decades after the synods’ foundations, August Pieper analyzed the differences in strengths and personalities of Missouri and its smaller sister bodies.⁸ Some Missouri historians have cited “triumphalism” and a muscular *esprit de corps* in Missouri’s self-confidence,⁹ and at least one Wisconsin writer detected in his synod an attitude of “small synod-itis.”¹⁰

Of course, even sisters who love each other will occasionally disagree. These intermittent conflicts were far outweighed by memories in Wisconsin and the ELS of high regard for Missouri, its leaders, its doctrinal sturdiness, and its missionary aggressiveness.¹¹

the Missouri Synod accepted separate invitations from the [ALC] and the [ULCA] to negotiate for the purpose of establishing pulpit and altar fellowship. . . . The ALC drew up a document called the *Declaration*, which was ambiguous on many important doctrines.” Missouri’s adoption of the *Declaration* in 1938 alongside its own *Brief Statement* “began its slow but steady decline” (182). See also Mark E. Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods: Events That Led to the Split between Missouri and Wisconsin* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2003), 320–323. Wisconsin Synod pastors saw changes in the Missouri Synod in its progressively more “liberal interpretations of Scripture,” its “smugness that took the attitude, ‘We are the Missouri Synod, so whatever we do must be OK,’” even “a growing high church tendency,” which, one respondent asserted, “almost inevitably breeds doctrinal indifference” (322).

⁶ David Schmiel, “The History of the Relationship of the Wisconsin Synod to the Missouri Synod Until 1975” (master’s thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1958), 1.

⁷ John Philipp Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, ed. Leigh D. Jordahl, 2nd ed. ([*Mosinee, WI*]: *Protestant Conference*, 1981), 251–252. Leigh Jordahl, in his introduction to Koehler’s *History*, explained, “Neither Hoenecke in making the remark nor Koehler reflecting upon it intended to fault the doctrinal position of the Missourians, but both rather had reference to a certain mind set” (xxiv).

⁸ Pieper noted Missouri’s strong feeling of internal brotherhood, against both theological opponents and even friendly Lutheran synods (August Pieper, “Anniversary Reflections,” trans. R. E. Wehrwein, revised, in J. P. Koehler, August Pieper, and John Schaller, *The Wauwatosa Theology*, ed. Curtis A. Jahn, vol. 3 [Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997], 245. Previously published as Aug[ust] Pieper, “Jubiläumsnachgedanken,” pts. 1–4, *Theologische Quartalschrift* 20, no. 1 [January 1923]: 1–18; no. 2 [April 1923]: 88–112; no. 3 [July 1923]: 161–177; no. 4 [October 1923]: 254–270.). The Wisconsin Synod, on the other hand, coming from differing confessional leanings, was not as cohesive (Pieper, “Anniversary Reflections,” 272).

⁹ See Mark E. Braun, “Only in the Eye of the Beholder?,” *LOGIA* 26, no. 1 (Epiphany 2017): 35–40.

¹⁰ C[arleton] Toppe, “Small Synoditis,” *The Northwestern Lutheran* (hereafter cited as *TNL*) 47, no. 23 (November 6, 1960), 355.

¹¹ Herman Amberg Preus, in J. Herbert Larson, “The Centennial of Walther’s Death with Special Reference to Our Synod’s Indebtedness to Him,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (December 2011): 287–288; and J[ohn] J[enny], “Golden Jubilee of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America,” *TNL* 9, no. 13 (June 25, 1922), 198.

But beginning in the mid-1930s, ELS and Wisconsin pastors and professors began to detect a different spirit in Missouri, and for a time they were unsure what they were hearing. Joh. P. Meyer wrote in 1941, “Is the Missouri Synod, the staunch champion of confessionalism in the past, really veering in its course? We hope and pray that this may not be the case.”¹² Doubts arose concerning nuances in the teaching of church and ministry, participation in the United States’ military-chaplaincy program, and issues regarding the Boy and Girl Scouts programs. Most disconcerting was that Missouri had formerly voiced its opposition to Scouts and the chaplaincy program as vigorously as Wisconsin had, and Missouri had even thanked Wisconsin for joining them in these unpopular stands.¹³ Missouri president John W. Behnken wrote in a 1955 letter that “the Missouri Synod has not changed its doctrinal position,”¹⁴ and an *American Lutheran* editorialist insisted, “Those faulting the Missouri Synod will be hard put to prove that the Synod as an organization or any of its members has departed from the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.”¹⁵

By the late 1950s, however, changes were becoming clearer. By 1962, Martin Marty stated flatly, “Missouri is changing and knows it.” Wisconsin criticisms hurt, Marty charged, because “they were reminders of a cozy world of a century and less ago when Missouri held some of the same positions.”¹⁶ Also in 1962, LCMS first vice-president Roland Wiederanders admitted, “We have not dealt honestly and openly with our pastors and people. We have refused to state our changing theological position in open, honest, forthright, simple, and clear words. Over and over again we said that nothing was changing but all the while we were aware of the changes taking place.”¹⁷

The split of the ELS from Missouri in 1955, and of Wisconsin in 1961, constituted one of the great tragedies of their synodical lives, made all the more painful by

¹² [Joh. P.] M[eyer], “Is the Missouri Synod Veering?,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 38, no. 3 (July 1941): 229–230.

¹³ [Theodore] G[raebner], “Misrepresentations Regarding Chaplain Service,” *The Lutheran Witness* 37, no. 7 (April 2, 1918), 107–108; see J[ohn] B[renner], “Why Do We Not Co-operate?,” *TNL* 5, no. 4 (February 24, 1918), 31–32.

¹⁴ John W. Behnken to “Taffy” (W. F. Klindworth), August 19, 1955, in Concordia Historical Institute, Behnken papers, Suppl. 1, Box 15, Folder 9; cited by Thomas A. Kuster, “The Fellowship Dispute in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: A Rhetorical Study of Ecumenical Change,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1969), 268.

¹⁵ “A Dead End for the Synodical Conference,” *The American Lutheran* 46 (October 1963): 5.

¹⁶ Martin E. Marty, “Head First but Not Headlong: Missouri’s New Direction, 1962,” *The Lutheran Standard* 2 (August 14, 1962): 5.

¹⁷ Quoted in James E. Adams, *Preus of Missouri and the Great Lutheran Civil War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 124.

expressions from Missouri's "moderate" element that they preferred no longer being shackled to their little sisters anyway.¹⁸

1961–1969: "A Deterioration Rather Than an Improvement"

In its 1961 action, when the Wisconsin Synod resolved to "suspend fellowship" with the Missouri Synod, it added in an explanatory footnote that "the word 'suspend' as used in the resolution has all the finality of termination during the duration of suspension, but contains the hope that conditions might someday warrant the reestablishment of fellowship."¹⁹ Wisconsin leaders hoped to see evidence of such conditions, but within the first fifteen months after the resolution two indicators suggested that circumstances would not be moving in that direction.

The first indication came following Missouri's 1962 convention in Cleveland. *The American Lutheran*, an independent publication within the synod, announced that "a new era has dawned for the Lutherans of America." Under the leadership of outgoing President Behnken, the synod "took a firm stand against the efforts of a small but extremely vocal minority to turn back the clock of history and commit the Synod to a policy of theological obscurantism and ecclesiastical isolationism." The election of a new synod president and manifestations of a progressive and evangelical "spirit promised exciting years ahead for the Missouri Synod."²⁰

Reporting in *The Lutheran Standard*, the magazine of The American Lutheran Church (ALC), Marty declared that the Missouri Synod "decisively repudiated its 'radical right wing,' which threatened not so much to prevail as to paralyze the convention." Marty predicted that "Missouri may not have seen the last of its dissidents, but [this] convention gave a better picture of their relative strength." He credited Missouri with casting reconciling glances at the Wisconsin Synod. "While new harmony is not likely to develop until Wisconsin changes officially," he wrote, "Missouri does not want to be reckless in burning bridges to the past."²¹

Wisconsin responded that the 1962 Cleveland convention confirmed that the LCMS had "yielded to a considerable extent to the contention" that it was "neither possible nor necessary to agree in all doctrines" and that such agreement was replaced by what was now considered "a wholesome and allowable latitude of theological opinion." Missouri's vision of achieving "greater confessional solidarity, to

¹⁸ An unnamed author likened the Missouri Synod's regret over the dissolution of fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod to the sadness one feels when a long-ill relative has finally died. "It was no secret that, among other things, the Wisconsin Synod had been a drag on Missouri's moves toward ecumenical participation." "Autopsy," *Dialog* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1962): 70.

¹⁹ *Proceedings of the Thirty-Sixth Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, August 8 to 17, 1961*, 198.

²⁰ "The Beginning of a New Era," *The American Lutheran* 45 (August 1962): 3.

²¹ Marty, "Head First but Not Headlong," 4.

say nothing of doctrinal agreement by the practice of a greater degree of cooperation,” was “the exact reverse” of what its former synodical policy had been.²²

The second indicator that Wisconsin’s suspension of fellowship could not easily be rescinded came at the Synodical Conference convention in Chicago in November 1962. Tensions between the four member synods had been present at least as far back as 1946.²³ Meetings at Fort Wayne in 1950 and the Twin Cities in 1952 “reached new lows in strife and bitterness, divided reports, and bloc voting. Positions had hardened, in most cases along synodical lines.”²⁴ By 1956 “the WELS and ELS delegates had their own opening communion service in the ELS church while the LCMS and Slovak delegates worshiped at the scene of the convention.”²⁵ In 1962, the Missouri and Slovak Synods held their opening service at St. James Lutheran Church, while the Wisconsin Synod and the ELS gathered at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church. On the convention floor, the majority report, representing the position of the LCMS and the Slovaks, announced that “the doctrinal basis, the qualifications for membership, and the purposes” expressed at the founding of the conference were still present among the synods of the Synodical Conference. The minority report of Wisconsin and the ELS maintained that “when one or more of the synods finds that another member body persists in leaving the Scriptural ground on which the unity of spirit is based, a call for dissolution is the only avenue left open to testify against such a departure.” The vote, reflecting the heavy numerical advantage of the Missouri Synod, was 177–53 against dissolving the Synodical Conference. Julian Anderson, reporting on the conference for the ELS magazine, *The Lutheran Sentinel*, concluded, “It may be fairly stated that [this] convention succeeded in preserving an external organization called the ‘Lutheran Synodical Conference,’ but its true spiritual glory is departed inasmuch as it no longer stands committed to its first-stated purpose—to give outward expression to the unity of spirit existing among the constituent synods.”²⁶

During the remainder of the 1960s, Wisconsin and its companion synods responded to inter-synodical differences regarding the meaning and practice of church fellowship. Wisconsin president Oscar Naumann wrote in 1963 that the WELS typically agreed to participate in inter-synodical discussions only if (1)

²² [Heinrich J.] V[ogel], “Toward Cooperation among American Lutherans,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (hereafter cited as *WLQ*) 59, no. 3 (July 1962): 216; see also Armin W. Schuetze, “Missouri’s New Direction,” *WLQ* 59, no. 4 (October 1962): 287–289.

²³ E. Benjamin Schlueter, opening address, in *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1946*, 8.

²⁴ Edward Fredrich, “The Great Debate with Missouri,” *WLQ* 74, no. 2 (April 1977): 166.

²⁵ Mark E. Braun, “‘Those Were Trying Years!’ Recollections of the ‘Split,’” *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 18, no. 1 (April 2000): 44.

²⁶ Julian G. Anderson, “Special Report: 47th Regular Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference,” *The Lutheran Sentinel* 45 (November 22, 1962): 340–344.

differences in doctrine and practice were frankly acknowledged, (2) the primary business of such discussions was the removal of existing barriers by honestly facing the points of difference, and (3) until actual unity has been achieved, every practice of church fellowship, including all forms of joint worship and church work, would be conscientiously avoided.²⁷

Wisconsin responded to the 1965 LCMS publication *The Theology of Fellowship* that it attempted “to set up lax principles of church fellowship by reinterpreting those passages of Scripture which bid us to avoid the persistent errorist.” In addition, “conspicuous by its absence” was any definition of the terms “church fellowship” or “unionism.”²⁸ Pulpit and altar fellowship were cited as “outstanding manifestations of church fellowship,” but the document contained no mention of expressions of fellowship beyond that.²⁹ Wisconsin believed that the statement “consciously” ruled out from the scope of church fellowship “things that have always among us in Synodical Conference circles been considered an essential part of the exercise of church fellowship.”³⁰ Instead, *The Theology of Fellowship* stated, “Our Synod should clearly recognize that, in the case of necessary work on the local, national, or international level, where the faith and confession of the church are not compromised, and where it appears essential that the churches of various denominations should cooperate or at least not work at cross purposes, our churches ought to cooperate willingly to the extent that the Word of God and conscience will allow.”³¹

Wisconsin replied that *The Theology of Fellowship* revealed “a deterioration rather than an improvement in the teaching on Church Fellowship in the Missouri Synod, at least in its Commission on Theology and Church Relations.”³²

Missouri’s 1967 convention in New York adopted *The Theology of Fellowship* and in doing so “documented the change in fellowship principles in the LCMS after disturbing evidences of the change had long appeared in the official life of the body.”³³ There was “no fellowship with the ALC—yet,” and some convention participants objected that the “Joint Statement and Declaration” previously approved by Missouri and the ALC failed to address “the real issues which have separated the

²⁷ Oscar J. Naumann, “Wisconsin Synod Answer Re: New Cooperative Agency,” *WLQ* 60, no. 1 (January 1963): 58–61.

²⁸ Gerald Hoenecke, “Supplement to the Report and Recommendation of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod re Theology of Fellowship,” *WLQ* 63, no. 1 (January 1966): 58.

²⁹ Hoenecke, “Supplement to the Report,” 58–59.

³⁰ Hoenecke, “Supplement to the Report,” 59.

³¹ “Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Theology of Fellowship* ([St. Louis]: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, [1965]), 43.

³² Hoenecke, “Supplement to the Report,” 61.

³³ Irwin J. Habeck, “Missouri Synod Convention,” *WLQ* 64, no. 4 (October 1967): 307. See also Braun, *Tale of Two Synods*, 132–138.

ALC and the LC-MS in the past.” Nevertheless, the 1967 convention resolved that there was sufficient scriptural and confessional basis for altar and pulpit fellowship between the two bodies and urged that the synod “proceed to take the necessary steps toward full realization of altar and pulpit fellowship.”³⁴

Wisconsin rejoiced in the “evident determination” of the 1967 convention to resist yielding to liberalism concerning the Genesis accounts of the creation and the fall of mankind.³⁵ It “reaffirm[ed] its faith in the united testimony of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions” that “God by the almighty power of His Word created all things in 6 days by a series of creative acts”; that “Adam and Eve were real, historical human beings, the first two people in the world”; and that the fall of our first parents is a historical fact “which corrupted God’s handiwork in Adam” and thus brought sin into the world, so that “since the fall of Adam all men who are propagated according to nature are born in sin.”³⁶ The convention approved a resolution restating doctrinal positions “that the Holy Scripture is the inerrant Word of God”; that “Christ has made atonement for the sins of the whole world”; that “Christ rose from the dead glorified in His flesh”; and “that only those who believe in Christ receive eternal life.”³⁷ Wisconsin’s Irwin Habeck cautioned, however, that “we have heard other reaffirmations of a sound doctrinal position and rejections of error from past conventions but have seen little evidence of decisive discipline against those who promulgated the views. . . . The resolutions concerning discipline are not much different from those of previous conventions.”³⁸

Thus, Missouri’s 1967 convention “marked time.” It did not provide “much that might give rise to the hope that the sister who has become estranged from us might return to our side. But we shall continue to do what we can to support with our prayers, and with the words and actions of our own Synod, those who are dedicated to bringing the [LCMS] back to where she once stood, one with us in doctrine and practice.”³⁹

Meanwhile, representatives of the ELS and WELS assembled as the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Forum beginning in October 1968. The objective of this forum was “to manifest in a more tangible way the unity of faith and confession, which

³⁴ Habeck, “Missouri Synod Convention,” 308–310.

³⁵ Habeck, “Missouri Synod Convention,” 307.

³⁶ “To Reaffirm Our Position on Creation, Fall, and Related Subjects,” in *Proceedings of the Forty-Seventh Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (n.p., [1967]), 95.

³⁷ “To Reaffirm Our Position on Certain Doctrines,” in *Proceedings of the Forty-Seventh Regular Convention*, 95.

³⁸ Habeck, “Missouri Synod Convention,” 308.

³⁹ Habeck, “Missouri Synod Convention,” 311.

already exists between the two bodies, and to strengthen each other in our endeavor to remain faithful to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.”⁴⁰

1969–1974: “The Deep Theological Cleavage Became Evident”

Missouri’s 1967 declaration that “the Scriptural and confessional basis for altar and pulpit fellowship between [the LCMS] and the [ALC] exists” and resolution that the [Missouri] Synod proceed to take the necessary steps toward full realization of altar and pulpit fellowship” with the ALC⁴¹ set the stage for a dramatic showdown at Missouri’s 1969 convention in Denver, and it set in motion the next phase leading to the walkout.

Two months before the Denver convention, Concordia Seminary professor Arthur Carl Piepkorn wrote an editorial favoring fellowship with the ALC, remarkable not only for the position he espoused but also for the absolute certainty with which he expressed it: “The question would not be *if* the vote would favor authorizing” fellowship but “only the size of the margin in favor of it.” He expected that “70 percent of our people probably approve the authorization of such fellowship” and “conceivably the vote in favor would run much higher.” A recent poll conducted among Concordia Seminary students had indicated that 90 percent of faculty members and graduate students and more than 80 percent of ministerial students also approved the merger. Piepkorn apparently believed this poll represented “a good cross-section” of the LCMS. The LCMS Council of Presidents had also voted 25 to 13 in favor of the fellowship with the ALC.⁴²

Beyond the numbers, Piepkorn maintained that the movement toward Missouri-ALC fellowship was “practically irreversible” because of the “countless civic, welfare, evangelistic, missionary, and pastoral activities” already linking the two synods, on local, regional, and national levels. “In a great variety of ways the congregations of the [LCMS] and the [ALC] are practicing *de facto* fellowship already.” There were exceptions, of course, but Piepkorn maintained that such exceptions “merely prove the almost universal rule.”⁴³

Piepkorn charged that any convention delegates who would vote against the fellowship proposal would fail adequately to represent the mind of the LCMS and could “with the best intentions” vote “contrary to the will” of the synod—as if to

⁴⁰ Gerald Hoenecke, “Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Forum,” *WLQ* 66, no. 1 (January 1969): 59–60.

⁴¹ Cited by Heinrich J. Vogel, “Steps Taken by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Toward Declaration of Fellowship with The American Lutheran Church,” *WLQ* 66, no. 1 (January 1969): 67.

⁴² Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Will the Decision on Fellowship at Denver Make a Difference?,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 40, no. 5 (May 1969): 260–261.

⁴³ Piepkorn, “Will the Decision on Fellowship,” 261.

assert that only moderates discerned the true mood of the synod; any delegates who saw the fellowship issue differently were all but foreign to the synod. “Even if the assembly at Denver were to vote no on authorizing fellowship,” Piepkorn wrote, it was “quite inconceivable that not a single one of these people would pause for a moment in doing what they have been doing,” because they had already made their decision “before the forum of their conscience” and thus “see no conflict between their loyalty to what they see as the demand of the Holy Spirit and the demand of their commitment” to LCMS principles.⁴⁴

Carl Lawrenz, president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, served as the WELS observer in Denver. He noted that

already at the open hearings of the Floor Committee on Church Relations, . . . the deep theological cleavage became evident. Those opposing a declaration of fellowship . . . stressed the unsound position of many of its leaders in the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures, the ALC’s lax lodge practice, and its ecumenical relations with heterodox churches and church federations. . . . These speakers therefore found an establishment of fellowship with the ALC unwarranted. On the other side, those speaking for ALC fellowship did not spend too much time questioning and refuting the facts about the ALC. . . . They rather viewed these facts from a different theological approach. . . . Instead of demanding full unity in Scriptural doctrine and practice for fellowship, those speaking in favor of fellowship with the ALC emphasized a vaguely defined consensus in the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. . . . Instead of stressing the absolute inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures, also in factual statements, they contented themselves with a functional trustworthiness of the Scriptures in the matters of Christian faith and life.⁴⁵

Lawrenz concluded that in the presidential election, the division between candidates centered on their “theological positions.” Four of the five top candidates “were considered to be conservatives,” and Dr. J. A. O. Preus was elected president on the second ballot. It appeared that “a large segment of voting delegates had given Dr. Preus the mandate of leading his synod back to its former positions in doctrine and practice” and “to turn the synod away from the new theological approaches which had led to a recommendation of establishing fellowship with the ALC.”⁴⁶

Dr. Preus urged each delegate to “vote his conscience,” and he himself favored “a delay in declaring fellowship.” A minority report signed by ten of the forty-six-man floor committee, advocating further study of the issue “was merely read for

⁴⁴ Piepkorn, “Will the Decision on Fellowship,” 261–263.

⁴⁵ Carl Lawrenz, “The Denver Convention of the LCMS[,] July 11–18, 1969,” *WLQ* 66, no. 4 (October 1969): 277–279.

⁴⁶ Lawrenz, “The Denver Convention of the LCMS,” 279–280.

purposes of information.” The vote was 522 for the declaration of fellowship and 438 against. Dr. Preus closed with this statement: “As your president I will abide by the decision of the convention and will endeavor to procure consensus and fellowship with all Lutherans in America with all vigor and sincerity.” Lawrenz interpreted the division of votes as not a divided judgment on the position of the ALC in doctrine and practice “but rather a cleavage in theological position on the part of the voters.” The resolution establishing fellowship with the ALC “was handled as a matter of judgment, rather than one of conscience.”⁴⁷

Another Wisconsin observer, Professor Armin Schuetze, wrote that “one can only conclude that for Dr. Preus and for the majority of the LC-MS recognition of the full inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures is no longer a prerequisite for church fellowship.” Missouri, Schuetze wrote, had “openly and formally conceded that its teaching and practice of a century was wrong.”⁴⁸ The *Brief Statement* of 1932, which included the words “We repudiate *unionism*, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God’s command,”⁴⁹ had yielded to the ALC position that it was not necessary to agree on all points of doctrine.⁵⁰ To the ALC, Schuetze could only say, “but we say it sadly, Thou hast conquered.”⁵¹

Earlier that year, Concordia Seminary president Alfred Fuerbringer had announced that he was stepping down from his position. Under his leadership, Concordia had already been undergoing “a quiet revolution” in which “biblical studies were receiving major attention, replacing dogmatic theology.” Several faculty members “were helping Concordia Seminary and the church body come to terms with contemporary issues of biblical criticism.”⁵² In May 1969, Dr. John Tietjen was informed that he had been elected to become Concordia’s next president.⁵³

Early in 1970, a group of pastors, professors, teachers, church officials, and laymen issued the statement “A Call to Openness and Trust.” This group called for

⁴⁷ Lawrenz, “The Denver Convention of the LCMS,” 280.

⁴⁸ Armin W. Schuetze, “Formal Announcement of Fellowship,” *WLQ* 66, no. 4 (October 1969): 285.

⁴⁹ *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, [1932]), 13.

⁵⁰ As early as 1938, the American Lutheran Church had stated, “We are firmly convinced that it is neither necessary nor possible to agree in all non-fundamental doctrines.” See “Resolutions of the American Lutheran Church with Reference to Lutheran Union,” cited in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 10, no. 1 (January 1939): 59.

⁵¹ Armin W. Schuetze, “Formal Announcement of Fellowship,” *WLQ* 66, no. 4 (October 1969): 284–285; see also Carleton Toppe, “No Warning Against Typhus?,” *TNL* 57, no. 15 (July 19, 1970), 235.

⁵² John H. Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile: Confessional Hope and Institutional Conflict* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 6.

⁵³ Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile*, 6.

“greater freedom in the Lutheran Church.” Reviewing the statement, Schuetze wrote,

What kind of freedom do they seek? . . . This statement . . . is in fact a declaration of independence from authority in the Christian’s faith and life. From whose authority do they seek freedom? Is it merely from the authority of a denominational organization? Or of church leaders preoccupied with their own institutional power? . . . They are asking for freedom to call Jesus a liar when He refers to a portion of the Old Testament as written by Moses. They are asking for freedom to declare the Bible factually false. . . . They are asking for freedom from the authority of Scripture, freedom from confessional commitment. That is not the freedom God gives us under the Gospel. . . . The freedom He gives us is from the tyranny of Satan and sin, so that the Christian freely and joyfully places himself under God’s Word, under Scripture, and freely confesses the full truth therein revealed, as we do in the Lutheran Confessions.⁵⁴

Thus, according to Schuetze, the appearance of “A Call to Openness and Trust” provided further evidence of the “deep doctrinal cleavage” within the synod. President Preus in his letter to LCMS clergy warned, “Make no mistake about this, brothers. What is at stake is not only inerrancy but the Gospel of Jesus Christ itself, the authority of Holy Scripture, the ‘quia’ subscription to the Lutheran Confessions, and perhaps the very continued existence of Lutheranism as a confessional and confessing movement in the Christian world.”⁵⁵ Schuetze issued a challenge: “Will President Preus follow through? Or will he be satisfied merely to have complained that synodical channels and procedures were ignored? . . . Will he be content to have invited these ‘troublers of Israel’ to leave [their] fellowship, something they themselves have already said they [did] not intend to do? The patient is very, very sick. Dr. Preus has diagnosed the illness. A few antibiotics won’t do. Radical surgery is called for. Is Dr. Preus ready to head a team of surgeons for the operation?”⁵⁶

In fall 1969, Pastor Herman Otten of New Haven, Missouri, had met with President Preus, pleading with him to conduct heresy trials against Concordia faculty members.⁵⁷ A year later, Preus announced the appointment of a Fact-Finding Committee to investigate the seminary.⁵⁸ The impending investigation was ridiculed by

⁵⁴ Armin W. Schuetze, “More Evidence of the ‘Cleavage,’” *WLQ* 67, no. 2 (April 1970): 134–135.

⁵⁵ Schuetze, “More Evidence of the ‘Cleavage,’” 135–136. Schuetze was quoting portions of Preus’ letter entitled “Brother to Brother,” dated February 11, 1970. Portions of this letter are reprinted in *Exodus from Concordia: A Report on the 1974 Walkout* (St. Louis: Concordia College, 1977), 19–20.

⁵⁶ Schuetze, “More Evidence of the ‘Cleavage,’” 135–136.

⁵⁷ Adams, *Preus of Missouri*, 168.

⁵⁸ Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile*, xiii.

Newsweek magazine as a “sitting in judgment on some of the church’s most respected scholars,” and “heading the inquiry was a man whose theological reputation rests largely on his efforts to prove that God created the world in six days of 24 hours each.”⁵⁹ Such reporting, wrote Wisconsin’s Carleton Toppe, was “particularly mortifying to the liberal segment of the Missouri Synod” but was “only somewhat less galling to the average conservative Missourian because his synod has long wooed public favor. Missourians have been watching the public relations barometer with anxiety for 30 years.”⁶⁰

As Missouri’s 1971 convention in Milwaukee approached, more than two hundred overtures to the convention called for some form of suspension of fellowship with the ALC.⁶¹ Committee 2 submitted a resolution, “To Uphold Synodical Doctrinal Resolutions,” which would have made synodically adopted resolutions doctrinally binding throughout the LCMS. However, convention delegates rejected this resolution, prompting Wisconsin’s Carl Lawrenz to comment, “Scripture, of course, at all times gives Dr. Preus full authorization to take a firm stand in his Synod . . . to implement the kind of doctrinal discipline which becomes necessary to put this position into practice. We note, however, with sadness that the delegates of the Synod assembled in convention failed to supply him with a resolution which indicated that they would wholeheartedly stand behind him as he carried out his Scriptural mandate. The fact that the adoption of such a resolution was effectively and very deliberately defeated carries a very disturbing message.”⁶²

The results of the 1971 convention also rocked the Milwaukee area, bringing the issues closer to future Wisconsin Synod pastors attending Northwestern College in nearby Watertown or the seminary in Mequon, north of Milwaukee. Two LCMS churches, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Okauchee and St. John’s Lutheran Church in Watertown, were among seven LCMS congregations that became charter members of the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism, a new, conservative Lutheran synod that protested Missouri’s recent decisions.⁶³

Under the date of March 3, 1972, President Preus announced preliminary progress on the task assigned to him by the Milwaukee convention to report “the progress made by the board of control of Concordia Seminary” relative to the Fact-Finding Committee. Initially, the seminary’s board declined to take any action on

⁵⁹ “Discord at Concordia,” *Newsweek*, January 4, 1971), 41.

⁶⁰ Carleton Toppe, “Misericordia,” *TNL* 58, no. 4 (February 14, 1971), 51.

⁶¹ *Workbook of the Forty-Ninth Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, 150–183.

⁶² Carl Lawrenz, “The Subversive Theory of Open Questions,” *WLQ* 68, no. 4 (October 1971): 265–267.

⁶³ Carl Lawrenz, “F.A.L. A New Confessional Lutheran Church Body,” *WLQ* 69, no. 1 (January 1972): 38–40.

these guidelines. A majority of Concordia's faculty members defied Dr. Preus and rejected the *Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*. They argued that "the positions rejected in the *Statement* are in most cases not the position of any member of this faculty," and in a few cases they were "caricatures of positions of one or more of our colleagues. But in almost every case the distortion is so severe that it does not represent the actual position of any of us."⁶⁴

Wisconsin's Harold Wicke commented,

[This] is not a confrontation between two men, . . . [but] the clash of two systems of thought, two ways of life, two methods of reading the Word of God. At stake finally is every single doctrine of the Christian faith. . . .

The fact that more than half of the document is taken up with [the doctrine of Scripture] reveals that it is here where the real trouble lies, in the attitude toward the Scripture—its inspiration, its authority, its infallibility, its unity, its interpretation. Where there is no unanimity in the understanding of the Scripture, there can be no doctrinal unity.⁶⁵

Early in 1973, the Concordia faculty issued two booklets, both of which bore the title *Faithful to Our Calling[,] Faithful to Our Lord*.⁶⁶ The first volume contained a joint confession of faith from the faculty; the second featured statements of individual faculty members. Wisconsin professor Siegbert Becker charged that the second booklet made it

as clear as any "investigation" of the faculty could that there is no longer any possibility of speaking about a "common consent" to any doctrinal position in the LCMS. . . . The first of the nine discussions opens wide the door to welcome evolutionary views into the theology of the Missouri Synod. The second makes a mythological view of the fall theologically respectable. The third adopts the neo-orthodox view of miracles, which, while not denying them in rationalistic fashion, does openly question the factual correctness of the Biblical reports of such miracles. The fourth offers an oblique defense of "Gospel reductionism." The fifth and sixth cast serious doubt on the orthodox view of the Messianic prophecies. . . . The whole treatment of the Old Testament Messianic hope appeared to this reviewer to play fast and loose with the statement of the Confessions that "the patriarchs knew the promise of the Christ" (Ap IV, 57). . . .

⁶⁴ Reported by H[einrich J.] Vogel, "A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles," *WLQ* 69, no. 3 (July 1972): 200–210. He refers to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles* (St. Louis: [The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod], 1972).

⁶⁵ Harold E. Wicke, "Briefs by the Editor," *TNL* 59, no. 9 (April 23, 1972), 134.

⁶⁶ Faculty of Concordia Seminary, *Faithful to Our Calling[,] Faithful to Our Lord: An Affirmation in Two Parts*, 2 vols. ([St. Louis: Concordia Seminary], n.d.).

The last two discussions, if they are adopted by the Synod as its position, will forever make it impossible to recapture the kind of unity of doctrine that once characterized Missouri, for it gives men freedom to read into the Bible or out of the Bible anything that does not please the interpreter. The true inerrancy of the Bible is surrendered. The historical-critical method is approved and the “new hermeneutic” is accepted.

With David we can only say, “How are the mighty fallen!” As a former member of the LCMS, this writer feels constrained to add, “I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan.”⁶⁷

In July 1973 at New Orleans, 329 resolutions were brought to the floor of the fiftieth convention of the Missouri Synod, and more than 950 memorials were addressed to it. President Preus was easily reelected on the first ballot, and his election was followed by 150 results favorable to conservatives, including vice presidents, the secretary, the treasurer, boards of directors, nominating committees, commissions, boards, and boards of control. According to Heinrich Vogel, the convention approved three significant resolutions: (1) that the synod’s constitution “permits, and at times requires, the formulation and adoption of doctrinal statements as definitive of the Synod’s position relative to controversial issues”; (2) that the *Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles addressed itself* to “the doctrinal issues troubling the church”; and (3) that the Concordia faculty majority was guilty of “false doctrine running counter to the Holy Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the synodical stance.” This false teaching “cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended.”⁶⁸

The conservative element in the LCMS clearly had won “the battle of New Orleans,” having asserted itself “in unmistakable terms as standing for the authority of Scripture” and having shown “a willingness to apply this theological stance to the problems afflicting” the synod. Wisconsin’s Heinrich Vogel cautioned, however, that “much will depend on the thoroughness with which these principles set down in the resolutions adopted at New Orleans are applied in the discipline which the responsible boards and commissions in the Synod must now carry out.” Both sides acknowledged that the synod is a “house divided,” but “neither is willing to concede leadership to the other.” If some are not satisfied that the synodical leadership cannot gain control of the body, “they will have to separate themselves from it and join their forces with others of the same persuasion.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Siegbert W. Becker, “Faithful to Our Calling—Faithful to our Lord,” *WLQ* 70, no. 2 (April 1973): 131–132.

⁶⁸ H[einrich J.] Vogel, “The 50th Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,” *WLQ* 70, no. 4 (October 1973): 287–289.

⁶⁹ Vogel, “50th Regular Convention,” 290.

Richard John Neuhaus, an LCMS pastor in Brooklyn and a forthright opponent of Dr. Preus, charged that in recent decades the synod's leadership "kept telling the people there were no changes in the Missouri Synod, when any village idiot anywhere in the church knew there were changes." People felt "lied to and cheated."⁷⁰ Wisconsin's Edward Fredrich responded, "Wisconsin Synod members whose intersynodical memories go back to the time when the Synodical Conference was disintegrating will be reminded by the Neuhaus commentary . . . of [the] frustrating effort to point out and pin down changes in theological positions of former brethren. Always and again the claim was made that no changes had taken place. Neuhaus has his history straight on that point. . . . Our hope [is] that in basic issues the Missouri Synod, as it began at New Orleans, will continue to change and once again become what it was before it changed."⁷¹

Wisconsin's Carleton Toppe added that conservatives must be "prepared to make painful sacrifices. The distastefulness of strong discipline must replace the former more palatable permissiveness." Those who choose to return to historic Lutheranism "will need to accept the stigma of isolationism, and to forfeit public approval. And they dare not flinch from the anguish of severing ties with members of their synodical household—to split their congregations and their synod if need be." To restore Missouri to its confessional integrity will require "clear-sightedness, painful sacrifices, much toil and prayer, and complete reliance on the boundless help of God. That will be almost a theological miracle."⁷²

Less than two months after the 1973 convention, more than eight hundred Missouri Synod Lutherans met in Des Plaines, Illinois, to "protest errant actions of the majority" and to form an organized "confessional movement," as reported by Carleton Toppe. The conference set in motion the legal incorporation of a national organization, which would adopt the name Evangelical Lutherans in Mission (ELIM). The group's stated purpose was "not to leave the Missouri Synod" but "to stay and work within" it. They insisted they were "not schismatics and will not be responsible for schism" but would "continue our movement of confession and protest within our Synod."⁷³ President Preus called their action "a rebellion not only against our Synod and its recent convention but, more importantly, against God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word," and he urged them to reconsider their actions.⁷⁴ But an

⁷⁰ James E. Adams, "Missouri Synod Lutherans: Conservative Takeover," *The Christian Century* 90 (August 1, 1973), 772.

⁷¹ Edward Fredrich, "Neuhaus and New Orleans," *TNL* 60, no. 18 (September 9, 1973), 290.

⁷² Carleton Toppe, "Reversing Time and Tide," *TNL* 60, no. 17 (August 26, 1973), 263.

⁷³ H[einrich J.] Vogel, "Evangelical Lutherans in Mission," *WLQ* 71, no. 1 (January 1974): 62–63.

⁷⁴ J. A. O. Preus, "Meeting of Insurgents Deplored," *The Lutheran Witness* 92 (September 16, 1973), 383.

opposing voice in a new publication, *Missouri in Perspective*, countered, “The President appears most distressed over [his] inability to control and bind the consciences of our membership on the basis of majority vote in Synodical conventions.”⁷⁵

Wisconsin’s *Quarterly* contained a lengthy account of the tumultuous events in and around Concordia Seminary in late 1973 and early in 1974, including

- the suspension of Dr. Tietjen and the appointment of Dr. Martin Scharlemann as acting president of the seminary;
- the declaration by 40 faculty members and a majority of the student body refusing to teach or attend classes;
- the board’s dismissal of 45 professors and staff members from their positions;
- a meeting of more than 350 students who declared that they found it “impossible in good conscience to continue their education under the present Seminary Board of Control”; and
- the procession of students and faculty members walking off the Concordia campus, referring to their status as “exiles,” indicating that they planned to form a Seminary in Exile at facilities offered by Eden Theological Seminary and the St. Louis School of Divinity.⁷⁶

Dismayed but Hopeful

A complete analysis of Wisconsin’s reaction to Missouri’s tragedy was provided by seminary professor Joel Gerlach in Wisconsin’s *Northwestern Lutheran*:

From our vantage point it appears that the action of the faculty majority was without justification. The constitution of the Missouri Synod makes the Board of Control, not the faculty, the responsible governing body of the Seminary. The faculty’s mass action to force the Board of Control to submit to its demands was disorderly. If a professor serving under the jurisdiction of a governing board cannot in good conscience subscribe to its policies and directives, he is free to resign. But he is not free to refuse to do what he is called to do.

The Board’s action on the other hand was inevitable. No other course was open to it. Either the Board as the governing body is responsible, or it is not. If it acquiesces to an ultimatum of its faculty, order is lost and anarchy rules.

Clearly there is a doctrinal issue involved. The controversy ought to have been resolved on the basis of that issue. Officials of the Synod complicated matters unnecessarily by including procedural matters and by attempting to solve the problem with diplomacy. We hope that the “moderates” in the Synod will

⁷⁵ “Response to ‘Insurgent Charge,’” *Missouri in Perspective* 1 (October 22, 1973), 4.

⁷⁶ H[einrich J.] Vogel, “Troubled Missouri,” *WLQ* 71, no. 2 (April 1974): 142–144.

not succeed in beclouding the issue by shifting attention to procedural technicalities.

As members of a former sister Synod, we view the turmoil in Missouri with mixed emotions. . . .

We are dismayed . . . because a controversy among Lutheran Christians has been given so much play in the public press, sometimes even at the invitation and with the cooperation of the combatants. The world sees it and smiles smugly over our discomfiture. . . . We are dismayed because many of God's people are confused and confounded by it all, not knowing who or what to believe amid all the conflicting claims and counterclaims. We are dismayed because Concordia was for decades a symbol and a citadel of orthodox and confessional Lutheranism, and now she lies stripped of her former glory. We are dismayed also because the Synod with which we labored and toiled in fellowship for almost a century is now a house divided against itself.

Yet we are also hopeful because we have learned from Scripture and from history that turmoil is often prelude to renewal. We are glad that the malign cancer has been diagnosed, identified, and eliminated at least from one part of the body. We are hopeful that the surgery will have arrested the spread of the disease. And we are hopeful that the treatment, painful though it may be, will continue until the patient is healed. We are hopeful too that the Lord has given Concordia a reprieve. . . .

Looking to the future, we wish Concordia's Board the help and direction of God's Spirit in restoring the authoritative "thus saith the Lord" to Concordia's once hallowed halls. We wish Missouri's leaders well in their continuing efforts to deal with teachers at other Synodical institutions who share the moderates' unscriptural view of Scripture. We hope too that Missouri's leaders will not succumb to the temptation to try to restore peace to their troubled church by attempting to reconcile irreconcilable views of the Bible within the Synod. . . . Scripture does not encourage us to sit down with those in error to try to find a way to live together in harmony without resolving the error on the basis of God's Word. Scripture urges us to speak the truth to them in love in the hope of leading them to repentance. . . .

It behooves us all to pray earnestly and often for those in Missouri who share our view of Scripture. God bless their efforts to establish and maintain the authority of the Word throughout their Synod!⁷⁷

John Tietjen characterized the LCMS convention in 1962 as "a turning point in the life of the Missouri Synod, signaling a way to move from rigidity in theology and isolation in church life toward more openness in both theology and mission."⁷⁸ But

⁷⁷ Joel C. Gerlach, "Phoenix in St. Louis," *TNL* 61, no. 7 (April 7, 1974), 106–107.

⁷⁸ Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile*, 6.

the conservative publication *Affirm* reported that “for more than a decade events at the Sem had been building to the Tietjen suspension.” Even before Tietjen became Concordia Seminary’s president, “Missouri had started to grow aware of the fact that its faculty harbored theological deviants who wanted to lead the church away from its traditional theology, based on the Word, to a liberal theology in conflict with the Lutheran heritage.”⁷⁹

David Scaer observed “something messianic in how Tietjen saw himself.” Scaer asked, “How else is one to interpret the following remark” from Tietjen’s *Memoirs*? “I am convinced that God, who raised Jesus from the dead, worked through institutional death and transfiguration to produce the ELCA.”⁸⁰ Robert Preus, reviewing Tietjen’s *Memoirs* in 1992, wrote, “Tietjen and his colleagues did not ever sufficiently understand the thinking of ordinary Missouri pastors and people. . . . They were God-fearing, pious people who wanted to remain Lutheran and who believed the Bible. They were not interested in ecumenical relations with other church bodies, and they were confused and frightened by the so-called historical critical method, whose apologists could never explain it and rarely knew what it was. They were parochial in the good Lutheran sense of the word. And they should never have been taken for granted.”⁸¹

The evidence suggests that at significant junctures, moderates overestimated the level of support from within their synod. An editorial in *The Lutheran Witness* in 1962 stated, “Emphatically and in many ways the Cleveland convention repudiated the legalistic tactics of a tiny segment which had troubled Synod relentlessly for decades and the devious devices of splinter groups which had spawned irritation and festering discontent.”⁸² Marty wrote in *The Lutheran Standard* that the synod had “decisively repudiated its ‘radical wing’ which threatened not so much to prevail as to paralyze the convention.”⁸³ While the 1962 convention was indeed a victory for moderates, they may not have recognized or did not want to acknowledge the growing resurgence of synodical conservatives in free conferences and independent publications. Piepkorn’s 1969 article in *Concordia Theological Monthly* strongly suggests that he mistook campus and faculty support for fellowship with the ALC as representative of the mindset of the synod as a whole. While Piepkorn predicted a victory of 80 percent or greater in the vote for fellowship with the ALC, the vote

⁷⁹ “The Tietjen Suspension,” *Affirm* 3 (January 1974), 1.

⁸⁰ David P. Scaer, *Surviving the Storms: Memoirs of David P. Scaer* (Fort Wayne, IN: Luther Academy, 2018), 134, citing Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile*, 341.

⁸¹ Robert Preus, review of *Memoirs in Exile: Confessional Hope and Institutional Conflict*, by John H. Tietjen, *LOGIA* 1 (Reformation 1992): 70–71.

⁸² “Editorial: Turning Point,” *The Lutheran Witness* 81 (August 21, 1962), 406, emphasis added.

⁸³ Marty, “Head First But Not Headlong,” 4.

succeeded by less than 55 percent.⁸⁴ This miscalculation and some of his comments—in the view of this author—reveal not only overconfidence but also hubris.

Shortly after the walkout, Marty predicted that “before many seasons the two Preuses will announce their sudden discovery that good stewardship calls for but one seminary. Only thus can the Preuses have some sort of faculty, student body, and the possibility of continuing accreditation.”⁸⁵ Wisconsin’s Joel Gerlach interpreted Marty’s comment as “the words of a person who knows he’s been licked.”⁸⁶ Richard Koenig, editor of *Forum Letter*, conceded victory to the conservatives, concluding, “Logically what all of this points to, as many have observed, is for the moderates to leave the Synod in favor of a structure of their own creation.”⁸⁷

There is no indication of a split theological opinion in the Wisconsin Synod concerning the issues that tormented and divided Missouri—although some would quickly qualify that statement by reminding that reports in Wisconsin’s theological journal and its members’ magazine were “managed news.” A few pastors and congregations left Wisconsin for Missouri, and perhaps a few more went from Missouri to Wisconsin. But during the 1960s and early 1970s, as many in Wisconsin watched with sadness, there was also a growing recognition that this was no longer their battle. That battle had been fought in 1961, and they were not fighting it again in 1974.

Professor August Graebner, father of Theodore Graebner, once likened the Christian in the world to a passenger riding in a train car who finds himself unwillingly thrust into a sudden race with a runaway car traveling on a parallel track. Though unavoidably involved and even deeply distressed, the passenger is not responsible for the fate of the runaway car or the catastrophe that may ensue. Graebner’s point was that in the same way, Christians are present in the world but not accountable for the injustices that occur there.⁸⁸ The Wisconsin Synod watched events in St. Louis with interest and sympathy, but those events no longer involved us. Every year a few more people with cherished memories of a once-heartfelt fellowship with Missouri went to heaven, and every year a new class of seminary graduates entered Wisconsin’s ministerium with fewer ties to Missouri and few, if any, friendships there.

⁸⁴ See above, n. 42.

⁸⁵ Martin E. Marty, “Missouri’s Exiles: Heartbreak, Ashes—and Victory,” *The Christian Century* 91 (June 12–19, 1974), 630–631.

⁸⁶ Joel C. Gerlach, “Missouri Personalialia,” *TNL* 61, no. 14 (July 14, 1974), 215, 222.

⁸⁷ Richard E. Koenig, “Missouri Report and a Message to (Uneasy) Missouri Moderates,” *Forum Letter* 3 (May 1974), 5.

⁸⁸ A[ugust] L. Graebner, “In der Welt, nicht von der Welt,” *Der Lutheraner* 50 (August 14, 1894), 135, cited by Alan Graebner, *Uncertain Saints: The Laity in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1900–1970* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1975), 111.

To the best of my knowledge, there was not in any Wisconsin publications a tone of *Schadenfreude* or smugness; no “I-told-you-so”s; no rejoicing at Missouri’s plight. Instead, there were repeated expressions of sadness and encouragements to pray for its “former sister.”

Carl Lawrenz wrote, “We can only pray that the doctrinally concerned members and leaders of the LCMS may seek and find their answers not in human strategy and ingenuity but in the edifying Word, including its injunctions relative to error and persistent errorists. May they at the same time find strength in the precious Gospel message which is at stake, strength for clear and resolute confessional action.”⁸⁹ Siegbert Becker addressed the impending “doctrinal examination of the faculty of a large Lutheran seminary, which was also once a great Lutheran seminary,” and noted that “as members of a church body which was once a part of the Synodical Conference, we recognize this as a matter that strikes close to our hearts.” Becker added, “Far from viewing this news, therefore, with Pharisaic pride, which thanks God that we are not as other men, we can only thank God that by His grace we have kept the treasure he has given us in grace.”⁹⁰

Carleton Toppe wrote, “To those who loved Concordia for what she once was—*Misericordia!*”⁹¹ And in a longer reflection, Toppe wrote,

Many of us have not forgotten our days of brotherhood, when we worshipped in each other’s churches, preached in each other’s pulpits, held joint mission festival services and Reformation rallies, and sang together at *Saengerfests* [*singer festivals*]. . . .

We who recall what Missouri was and who cherish the faith that many in her churches still cling to, shouldn’t we pray for her in her troubled hour? Pray that she may stand in awe of every syllable and letter that God has inscribed in His Book. Pray that she may place fidelity to eternal truth above concord among her churches, above prestige in her halls of learning, above filial love for the church of her fathers. Pray that she may remember the crown God gave her, and pray that God may keep her for that crown.⁹²

“What Will It Take for Us to Get Back to What We Once Were?”

In addition to official responses to the walkout, surveys were conducted during October 2023 with forty-three men who were students at Wisconsin’s Northwestern College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and who graduated from seminary

⁸⁹ Lawrenz, “The Denver Convention of the LCMS,” 283.

⁹⁰ Siegbert W. Becker, “Academic Freedom at a Confessional Seminary,” *WLQ* 67, no. 4 (October 1970): 227.

⁹¹ Toppe, “*Misericordia*,” 51.

⁹² Carleton Toppe, “A Prayer for the Missouri Synod,” *TNL* 58, no. 14 (July 4, 1971), 215.

between 1971 and 1981. Thirty men replied to the survey; their responses confirmed many of the viewpoints expressed in synodical publications, but some responses also contained personal memories and divergent appraisals.⁹³

The troubles in the Missouri Synod did not loom large for many students when they were in college. “To my shame,” one admitted, “I was oblivious to all that was going on in the world outside NWC.” Another had a roommate in his freshman year who belonged to the LCMS, but he did not “ever recall his talking about anything brewing at St. Louis.” The walkout “had little impact on me personally. I followed it somewhat closely but harbored little optimism for any real change in LCMS doctrine or practice.” Some recalled humorous comparisons to the name *Seminex*: an article in the *Black and Red*, the college magazine, suggested that if such an event occurred there, the breakaway group would be called “*Narthex*.” Another offered the alternate: “*Sominex*.”

Others remembered the walkout as “a giant, dramatic event” that they “paid attention to and talked about a lot.” The St. Louis crisis “dominated the religious news,” which respondents read “with interest and a bit of horror at what had happened in our former sister synod.” The “irreverence and anti-establishment attitude” displayed by some at Concordia who went on strike and then walked was disturbing. Another’s memories were more of a “big picture nature”: “Being the kind of person I am concerning anti-war/government rebellion, the idea of students walking out, for the reasons they did, did not sit well with me. It seemed to be another example of radical, left-wing thinking that I could not understand or appreciate. I came from a ‘flag-waving America, love-it-or-leave-it’ upbringing. . . . I remember having little sympathy for the LCMS: ‘That’s what you get for being so un-Lutheran to begin with.’”

At seminary, the walkout became more “front and center” than it had been in college. One respondent did not recall specific comments made by any of his professors but a general mood of “sorrow and caution.” The attitude another sensed “was that the profs expected something like the walkout to happen based on what had led to the split.” A third said that the walkout occurred during his vicar year, and he did not remember that subject “making a dent in our pastors’ conference agenda or during my time with my bishop [i.e., vicarage supervisor].”

Others have more distinct memories of classroom discussions, and one name was mentioned repeatedly: Siegbert Becker, a former Missouri Synod pastor and professor at Concordia Teachers College in River Forest who left to come to the WELS in 1963. One respondent recalled how he and his classmates “devoured class time” with Dr. Becker, who “had lived through the developing struggle” in Missouri

⁹³ The following unpublished survey responses are in the author’s private possession.

and “was able to provide first-hand glimpses into the heart of the issues.” Frequently and “with great insight,” Becker spoke from his experiences “within the ministerium of the LCMS about the liberalism that had crept into that synod.” He seemed “always to remain in control of his emotions” when he discussed these experiences, yet one former student believed he could sense “the disturbed emotions that were percolating within him.”

In particular, Dr. Becker “would excoriate Martin Scharlemann for his role in allowing negative higher criticism to enter and even be encouraged at LCMS schools, seminaries, and congregations.” Becker was amazed that after the walkout, Scharlemann became the acting president of Concordia Seminary and was then considered part of the conservative minority. Becker had had lengthy dealings with Scharlemann before he left Missouri and remarked about Scharlemann’s transformed reputation as a conservative that “a leopard doesn’t change its spots.” At one particular encounter between the two, President Behnken, who was also present, suggested that Scharlemann and Becker were simply talking past each other. Becker responded, “Dr. Scharlemann is saying the Bible isn’t the Word of God and I’m saying the Bible is the Word of God. We are not talking past each other.” According to Becker, Behnken replied, “The Missouri Synod cannot handle a bad press.”

Another specific instance Becker related involved a telephone call he made to Missouri’s president—either Behnken or Oliver Harms. He told the president that he had to remove either Martin Marty or himself from Missouri’s clergy roster. He told the president, “There was no way the LCMS could retain in its ministerium two theologians, one biblically liberal, the other biblically conservative.” The synod “could not embrace both positions and be theologically and scripturally liberal and conservative at the same time. It had to be one or the other.”

As students, those who were surveyed “learned from Becker that the core issue was the reliability and inspiration of the Scriptures.” Once commitment to the inerrancy and inspiration of the Scriptures was challenged and then abandoned, “there were no restraints on the spread of false theologies and practices.” Becker also maintained that Missouri’s troubles were attributable to its position on the doctrine of church and ministry.

A second source of information was Herman Otten’s weekly publication *Christian News*, which was delivered in bulk mailing to the seminary dormitory every week. “Many of us read his newspaper from cover to cover,” said one, and it played “a big part in the awareness of and interest in events surrounding the walkout.” One said Otten’s “cut-and-paste articles about the walkout provided whatever I knew about it.” Yet some pointed also to a darker side of *Christian News*, which became more pronounced as time went on. “It became difficult to differentiate truth from fiction. Most of us eventually caught on and read his newspaper with a growing

sense of discretion and care. A few classmates never caught on and later allowed his attacks to color their feelings toward the LCMS.” Another called Otten “a weak brother” whose most obvious weakness was “his propensity for gossip and slander.” As an example, the respondent cited an instance in which he read in *Christian News* a clearly inaccurate statement about a brother in the ministry. “I called the editor and spoke with him personally about it. He replied: ‘I can’t verify the truth and accuracy of everything I print. I don’t have time. You readers need to submit corrections and I will print them.’”

One seminary classmate, a former LCMS member, was “quite excited and optimistic” when the walkout occurred. His attitude was like that of Ziba falsely accusing his master, Mephibosheth, of thinking at the time of Absalom’s rebellion, “Today the house of Israel will return the kingdom to my grandfather and me” (2 Sam 16:3, my translation). The classmate must have been thinking, “Today the LCMS will return to its former stance of orthodoxy.” Two other Northwestern College graduates had chosen to attend Concordia Seminary rather than Wisconsin’s seminary, but they maintained regular correspondence with a third NWC graduate who remained in the WELS. “By the time of the walkout, the communication between these three was happening by phone every night.” The still-WELS student learned a lot of outside information and knew about the anticipated walkout before it happened.

Regarding family conversations, one professor’s son said, “My father did not go out of his way to give me a crash course in church history so that I could keep up with events.” Another remembered how the 1961 split had caused divisions even in the family of Wisconsin’s president, Oscar Naumann. His mother and most of his siblings had remained WELS members, but a brother-in-law was a prominent LCMS layman who became president of the Lutheran Laymen’s League. His congregation joined the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC) in 1976 and subsequently went to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Naumann’s children remembered their father saying that those pastors who had misled their uncle and aunt would have to answer to our Lord for that. President Preus attended President Naumann’s funeral in 1979 and expressed his condolences to the family, but when he asked if he might be allowed to speak a few words after the service, Naumann’s family decided that it would be inappropriate for him to do so. The family told him that they cherished the fellowship that the WELS and the LCMS had enjoyed for so many years, and they gave evidence of that by singing Walther’s great resurrection hymn, “He’s Risen, He’s Risen, Christ Jesus, the Lord,” at the funeral service. Another respondent remembered an LCMS cousin and how he and his cousin treated each other with respect and occasionally had brief conversations about the state of things in Missouri. He believed his cousin later became a leader among conservatives in the Concordia student body.

Others were affected more adversely by the troubling news they heard.

My recollections are more [about] intra-family discussions during the tense period when Chairman JAO (as they used to call him) began to clean house. One of my uncles was summarily fired from his teaching position, although he had a call. He and some other members of my family were all ELiM supporters, and I had cousins who attended Seminex. . . .

My recollections are more about the vibe: the sense of injury at high-handed power moves; the sense of righteousness in suffering for the gospel. The mystified question those at Seminex kept asking was, “What are you afraid of? So what if Paul didn’t write 1 Timothy? We still have the gospel.” For my part, there was more a sense of sadness and loss, sadness at the discord in the family, and the loss of what had been a close relationship with “Big Sister” Missouri. I understood that as long as Seminex grads were being “certified” by DPs for service, the great seminary battle solved little in terms of making the LCMS a unified body doctrinally.

Certainly there were also expressions of relief: “Are we glad we got out of fellowship when we did!” said one. Another admitted, “My thoughts about the St. Louis walkers was basically, ‘What a bunch of flamin’ liberals.’” He thought about a classmate who went all through prep school and college with him. “I never knew he was from a Missouri parish because no one ever made anything of it. He was just one of our own. It was only at Seminary that his latent left-wing Missouri tendencies came to life and were germinated.” When “the liberals had their day in St. Louis, my thoughts went back to him. ‘What have you gotten yourself into?’” Another had it instilled in him that “the LCMS wore the black hats and we wore the white hats. They were the enemy, and if the enemy had discord in its ranks, was that all bad?”

The clearest perception one respondent got from listening to WELS pastors talk in those days was “shock and awe.” Missouri’s acceptance of the *Common Confession*,⁹⁴ its flirtation with the ALC and its declaration of fellowship with it, and the walkout itself “traumatized the entire WELS for two generations. It fed the sense that we WELS-ers were God’s last and best hope for true Lutheranism.” Another

⁹⁴ The *Common Confession* was a second effort by the Missouri Synod and the ALC to draft a single doctrinal statement acceptable to all member synods of the Lutheran Synodical Conference and the ALC. While the Missouri Synod’s 1950 convention stated that the *Common Confession* showed that “agreement has been achieved in the doctrines” treated by the synods’ doctrinal committees (*Proceedings of the . . . Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* [1950], 585, 587), Wisconsin rejected the *Common Confession*’s statement on Scripture as “inadequate” (Edmund Reim, “As We See It: Once More, the Common Confession,” *TNL* 38, no. 7 [April 8, 1951], 104–105) because it contained no mention of verbal inspiration or inerrancy but allowed truth and error to stand side by side (Edmund Reim, “As We See It: Looking at the Foundation,” *TNL* 38, no. 9 [May 6, 1951], 135–136). See also Braun, *Tale of Two Synods*, 294–301.

remembered conversations among the many pastors who were members of his family. “The talk was about ‘Missouri’ issues. I don’t remember talking about Christ and how to get the good news out.” Missouri was the “whipping boy.” Too often, “I repeated that behavior myself.”

One respondent was told by Wisconsin pastors who established initial WELS congregations in the Detroit area that “the LCMS pastors there had no use for them,” and he had encountered similar “haughtiness from one of the liberals during the early years of my ministry.” One of his family members was a relative of LCMS pastor Robert Brueckner from West Nyack, New York, who regularly wrote letters to *Christian News* to antagonize Otten by recounting the worship services he had conducted with non-Lutheran and even non-Christian clergymen. He believed Brueckner was “among the top 0.1% of Missouri’s liberals.” A former Missouri member who crossed over to Wisconsin wrote,

I could not believe that such gifted, highly trained Christian men could throw their Christian faith overboard for their own rationalistic conclusions. I could not believe that they could discard the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture as well as the supernatural, miraculous feats and deeds of the Almighty God. . . . Nor could I believe that such men who continued to confess to be Christians could resort to preaching and teaching such deceitful, erroneous rationalizations as Christian truths to the detriment and the destruction of innocent souls. . . . I felt hurt emotionally. It bothered me deeply that such a thing as had happened with the professors of Seminex could ever have happened in Christendom.

Another asked, “If there is a theological debate of any kind, including analyzing the creeping kudzu of higher criticism of the Bible, wouldn’t Christian people sit together, pray for the Holy Spirit’s guidance in our study of the Word, and then proceed to pray and discuss Scripture, letting Scripture interpret Scripture?” He wondered how Christians could take “a page out of secular society” and try to change things through a “protest” or a “walkout.” If “efforts to gain support not only with outsiders (as if that should even matter) but with Christian souls is through political actions,” the battle was already lost.

While the walkout occurred in St. Louis, one recalled that he and classmates in Milwaukee were invited to an open forum at an area LCMS congregation. “We heard from leaders, professors, and pastors who supported Seminex.” One local district leader—respected in local Missouri circles—attempted to summarize and harmonize the obvious divisions by describing these disagreements as “diversity in unity and unity in diversity.” This pleased all the LCMS people present, and he received a

rousing ovation. But the WELS students all agreed, “If this was the prevailing sentiment across the LCMS, they certainly had a different understanding of fellowship” than the WELS did.

Another knew five students who were a year ahead of him in a WELS synodical school and who chose to attend Concordia Seminary; it distressed him that “four out of the five joined the Seminex walkout. They knew better.” He guessed that “they were influenced by the personalities of the professors who walked out. They were probably also caught up in the excitement of the moment.” This respondent was amazed that “those who remained at Concordia were able to weather the turmoil of a divided faculty and student body, both before and after the walkout.” Seminex students “returned to the dormitories at Concordia every night after the walkout and continued to eat in the cafeteria.” Several respondents commented that they were told that “Seminex students had more or less looted the Concordia library.” Another respondent traveled to Greece in the mid-1990s with a group of pastors, one of whom had been at Concordia during the walkout and later became an ELCA pastor. “He bragged about carrying books away from the library and [complained about] the narrow-mindedness of the LCMS.”

The effects of Seminex extended beyond seminary graduation. “I had been assigned two mission congregations in a community formerly reserved for the Missouri Synod,” said one. “There was a long-time LCMS congregation in town that had drifted toward a more liberal position, so much that the LCMS had established a daughter congregation nearby.” Soon the daughter congregation also received a new pastor who was “very progressive.” This new pastor shocked his congregation by giving Communion to his two-year-old child on the first Sunday he conducted worship there. “I was often dealing with ‘refugees’ from the local Missouri Synod congregations, as well as answering many inquiries about how the WELS was different from the Missouri. Many Lutherans in town were asking, ‘What is going on here?’”

Another “encountered numerous occasions when ministries that had traditionally been conducted jointly by the WELS and the LCMS were still being disentangled”—social services, nursing homes, radio and media ministries, etc. After Seminex, “it became hard to know which LCMS we were sharing ministries with. Old line Missouri pastors were refusing to work with Seminex followers, and we were caught in the middle.” He was invited by a college in the city to participate in a roundtable discussion with a local ELCA pastor and a local LCMS pastor to explain to students the differences between the church bodies. The ELCA pastor served a progressive congregation known for celebrating the Lord’s Supper with bread, wine, and cheese. “It became obvious that I was the lone ‘conservative’ while traditional LCMS

doctrinal positions were being attacked.” Afterward, conservative LCMS students expressed to him that what they were hearing was not what they had been taught.

Another recalled an incident that occurred in the area where he was serving. Two St. Louis students, one a senior, the other a second-year student, appeared in town, and they invited people to come to a more casual conversation that evening. The senior student began to defend the historical-critical method, and

I asked him if he believed the body of Jesus had risen from the dead. He gave the standard responses about the spirit of Jesus and the courage of the apostles. I said, “So, what if you get assigned to some small church in North Dakota and a little old lady is dying in a nursing home? Are you going to tell her that Jesus rose from the dead?” He answered, “If she believes Jesus rose from the dead, I’ll tell her he rose from the dead.” I said, “So if you believe God exists, then he exists, but if you believe that he doesn’t exist, then he doesn’t?” He answered, “That’s right.”

Meanwhile, the second-year student was taking all this in, and he said, “Is that where this all leads?” The senior snapped at him, “Of course. What do you think?” And the second-year student started crying. The respondent wrote, “I will never forget that night as long as I live. I often wonder what happened to him.”

“I felt sad,” another respondent said. The walkout “made the national news. I still remember the cover story in *Time* magazine, ‘Civil War in Missouri.’ Now the divisions and turmoil in the Missouri Synod” were out in the open.⁹⁵ “There was a growing understanding among Missourians that the WELS did indeed have something vital to offer them. Some however asked, ‘How long will it be before the same problems come upon you?’” Said another, “I still recall an instance speaking with a friend (at NWC then, later a WLS grad), a level-headed, respected guy. I referred to the downhill slide in the LCMS as a caution for us in the WELS. His reply was, ‘Oh, nothing like that will ever happen to the WELS.’ It was not spoken with an attitude of pride, but an amazing combination of naivete and complacency.”

As young pastors, some respondents took note of changes in their neighboring pastors. One pastor wrote, “The conservative LCMS pastors in my area refused to go to conference and commune with other LCMS pastors who were supportive of the walkout” and Seminex theology. A second remembered, “My brother, also a WELS pastor, was contacted in the early 1980s by a neighboring LCMS pastor. He told my brother that Missouri President Ralph Bohlman[n] had encouraged pastors to study the doctrine of fellowship,” but “there weren’t any nearby Missourians he

⁹⁵ Although many remember news of the walkout being featured on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines, and even on the *CBS Evening News* with Walter Cronkite, this researcher has found no evidence thus far to confirm those memories.

was eager to study with, so he contacted the nearest WELS guy instead.” That Wisconsin pastor’s son also struck up a friendship with one of the Missouri pastor’s sons, who has now become a WELS pastor. “This young Missouri pastor said he would not commune when he attended his LCMS pastoral conferences because he knew he wasn’t one in faith with a number of the pastors in his conference.”

One response differed from the rest:

Our attention to the exile stunted my growth in ministry and led me deeper into a Pharisaical focus on others and an unhealthy denominational pride. . . . Overall, the walkout . . . affected my spiritual growth and maturity and led to attitudes which took me decades to rise above by the grace of God. One of the Concordia professors who was a well-known leader of the walkout was also a noted homiletics professor. Through my own very esteemed Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary homiletics professor, the walkout professor has perhaps had a more positive influence in my pastoral life than almost any other person. He taught “propositional preaching,” I believe he called it: determine malady, means, and goal; personally and prayerfully digest the text; state your theme in about six words; deliver strong, biblical, Christ-centered sermons. Priceless!

Another concluded, “Seminex confirmed my joy in wanting to be a WELS pastor. I saw firsthand, within my own family, the doctrinal erosion that occurs when inerrancy is abandoned. President Harrison has characterized it as ‘the great tragedy that befell our beloved Synod.’ I heartily agree with that—and not only for the LCMS.”

The effort to restore Concordia was greeted with emphatic approval.

I believe that under the leadership of J.A.O. Preus, for the first time in American Lutheranism a synod that had begun to abandon the Scriptures turned back to a more conservative, confessional, and biblically-based course. We thank God that in the years since the LCMS has clearly confessed its commitment to the Scriptures as the inerrant and inspired Word of God. It has faithfully committed itself to the truth and power of the pure gospel. It has publicly affirmed that the synod’s official position on the Lord’s Supper is that closed communion should be practiced. It has worked tirelessly in recent years to draw Lutheran church bodies around the world out of the Lutheran World Federation and into genuine confessional Lutheranism.

Another wrote, “I along with many in the WELS were delighted to hear that our former sister synod was able to remove from its seminary many professors who refused to confess and teach that the Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God.” According to this respondent, President Harrison said that “the problem he and others face is dealing with the many pastors those false teachers trained for a

generation who remained in the synod, and the doctrine and practice they taught and established in the churches they served throughout their ministries.” The respondent noted that, with the apostle Paul, I rejoice wherever the Gospel is preached, and that certainly applies to that church body with which we were one for nearly a century. Our guys seem to respect Matt Harrison, and he seems to respect us. Such friendships would not have happened in those walkout days or in the years shortly after them.”

One WELS pastor who became a DMin student at Concordia Seminary during the 1990s said he “generally found that the faculty was firmly set on a course to train pastors who were committed to the historical grammatical method of interpreting the Scriptures and opposed to the historical critical method, and I met some wonderful, evangelical, deeply committed professors and fellow pastors.” Twice he was asked to serve as a casual observer at LCMS conventions. “It was apparent that there were still divisions in the ranks about doctrine and practice.” He “keenly” remembers that “the conservative element in one group did not consider the errors that took hold in the LCMS made it a heterodox church body” but instead regarded the events connected to the walkout to have been “a casual intrusion of error that had to be resisted and removed” from their orthodox church, even though it was taking decades to do it.

This same respondent reflected on the good the conflict brought to the Wisconsin Synod, in spite of the “many problems and much damage” it caused. “It was a strong test for confessional Lutherans in the WELS and the ELS as well as the LCMS. We really had to examine what we believed and what we would and must do to follow the truth of God’s Word.” The split helped the Wisconsin Synod “grow up” more in developing its own ministry resources and conducting its own mission efforts in the United States and around the world. The WELS managed “to retain much of its homegrown talent that may have otherwise been drawn into service at LCMS schools and agencies.” He also acknowledged “the contributions of Dr. Becker” to his faith life and ministry.

Finally, one respondent concluded, “My wife grew up in the Missouri Synod, and many in her wider family belong to its congregations. After the walkout and the resultant investigations and reports, no one questioned anymore why WELS had ended its fellowship with the LCMS. Instead, the Missouri members ask, ‘What will it take for us to get back to what we once were?’”

Conclusion

More than half a century has passed since the walkout at Concordia Seminary and the formation of Seminex. With every passing year, a smaller percentage of

pastors in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod will have memories of the events and the issues that caused them. Yet the walkout had and continues to have a significant effect on members of the former Lutheran Synodical Conference and beyond.