

JOHN W. O. BRENNER,  
“A SIX-FOOT RAMROD OF LUTHERAN CONSERVATISM”:  
THE RIGHT MAN FOR THE RIGHT TIME FOR THE WISCONSIN SYNOD AMONG  
INTERSYNODICAL RELATIONS

BY  
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## ABSTRACT

Fellowship issues have always been hard topics to address in a country that likes to compromise. This thesis examines the events that led up to the LCMS/WELS split and how President John W. O. Brenner dealt with those events during his presidency. It will focus on certain topics in which LCMS/WELS bumped heads throughout those years which lead to the break such as chaplaincy, scouting, fellowship, and relationship with the ALC. This paper looks at the positives and negatives of how President Brenner reacted toward those situations by reading and interviewing contemporaries. The main situations addressed are Wisconsin's Synod conventions where President Brenner spoke to the delegates in his President's Report. At those conventions, President Brenner also spoke through the Standing Committee on Matters of Church Union of which he chaired.

This paper demonstrates that President Brenner was the right man at the right time for the Wisconsin Synod. The purpose of this paper is to help pastors in the future recognize the doctrinal dissolution in other synods (or in their own congregations), to reinforce their firm stance on the Word, and to deal with them in a loving and patient manner. All this will be done by looking at President Brenner as an example.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
<b>PART I. A LOOK INTO THE PERSONALITY OF JOHN W. O. BRENNER.....</b>	<b>3</b>
A. Founded on sound doctrine at an early age.....	4
B. Strong leadership.....	4
C. A pastor before a president.....	6
D. All business .....	8
E. Good sense of humor.....	10
F. Personality among Missouri members .....	10
<b>PART II. JOHN W. O. BRENNER’S LEADERSHIP AS PRESIDENT .....</b>	<b>11</b>
A. Observing the yeast begin to spread in Missouri .....	11
1. Military chaplaincy .....	13
2. Scouting and lodges .....	18
3. “Joint Prayer” vs. “Prayer Fellowship” .....	22
4. Desired fellowship with the American Lutheran Church (ALC).....	24
B. The Standing Committee on Matters of Church Union .....	26
1. 1941 - Wisconsin Synod Convention .....	28
2. 1943 - Wisconsin Synod Convention .....	30
3. 1945 – Wisconsin Synod Convention.....	32
4. 1947 – Wisconsin Synod Convention.....	35
5. 1949 – Wisconsin Synod Convention.....	36
6. 1951 – Wisconsin Synod Convention.....	41
7. 1952 – Synodical Conference Convention .....	45
8. 1953 – Wisconsin Synod Convention.....	47
<b>PART III. JOHN W. O. BRENNER AFTER PRESIDENCY .....</b>	<b>52</b>
A. Church of the Lutheran Confessions (CLC) breaks with Wisconsin.....	52
B. Brenner as advisor to Standing Committee on Matters of Church Union .....	55
C. Brenner was strong-willed even to the end .....	55
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>APPENDICES:</b>	
Appendix A – WELS/LCMS Timeline before, during, and after Brenner’s Presidency .....	60
Appendix B – President Brenner’s Convention Devotions by Year.....	63
Appendix C – Milwaukee Journal Sentinel article on John W. O. Brenner’s Retirement ....	84
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>85</b>

## INTRODUCTION

“Wis. Synod, Missouri Split!” read the third headline in the Milwaukee Journal on August 18, 1961.<sup>1</sup> “How did this happen? Why did it come down to this? The Missouri Synod was so conservative. They stood so firmly on the doctrine of Scripture. Their practice was in line with their doctrine. How did they fall so far?” These are some thoughts that might go through someone’s head when he thinks about the history of the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod.

Before John W. O. Brenner became president of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) had a solid stance on the doctrine of fellowship. Something happened over the next few decades to change that. Missouri turned away from their firm stance on the doctrine of fellowship and instead lead toward unionistic tensions.

### Friedrich Bente’s Paper in 1904

In 1904 Friedrich Bente, a professor at Concordia, St. Louis, expressed Missouri’s early position on church fellowship in a paper he wrote entitled, “Why Can’t We Establish and Maintain Common Prayer Services with Iowa and Ohio?” This paper was written in response to a request by members of the Iowa and Ohio synods at the intersynodical conference in Detroit “to open and close future free conferences with a joint prayer service.”<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, Bente clearly answers the question as stated in the title of his paper. He introduces his point by stating, “Other members of the Synodical Conference pointed out that every participant certainly prays silently, but openly joined prayers of the congregation would certainly leave the wrong impression regarding unity of spirit and belief, and as if the teaching differences were of no special significance.”<sup>3</sup>

Predecessors of the American Lutheran Church (ALC), the Iowa and Ohio Synods, supported a very open attitude toward the doctrine of fellowship (along with other doctrines) and were rather judgmental toward members of the Synodical Conference in their stance.

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<sup>1</sup> James M. Johnson, “Wis. Synod, Missouri Split,” MS, August 18, 1961, 1:1.

<sup>2</sup> Frederich Bente, “Why Can’t We Establish and Maintain Common Prayer Services with [the Iowa and [the] Ohio [Synods]” *Lehre und Wehre* 51 (February 1905): 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: 1.

In response to the judgmental attitude of the Iowa and Ohio Synods, which supported the view of the General Synod, Friedrich Bente had some words to say:

From these people one cannot simply expect comprehension of the peculiar position of the Synodical Conference in Detroit. Neither can one take serious their accusations of ‘bigotry, narrow-mindedness, arrogance, stubbornness, and Phariseism.’ One cannot expect these theologically half or totally blind persons to perceive and show a clear vision of what is through God’s Word right or wrong in the Church.<sup>4</sup>

Bente makes the point that Missouri recognizes the Iowa and the Ohio Synods not as weak brothers, but as ones with whom they were not walking together in faith. Therefore, Missouri cannot pray with them because by doing so Missouri would support them in their false doctrine. Instead Missouri, by refusing to pray with Iowa and Ohio, states strongly that Iowa and Ohio teach false doctrine.

The Iowans and Ohioans do not want to be considered as such weakly brethren—and even if they did we could not agree. The Iowans and Ohioans have withdrawn from Missouri...Iowa fifty years ago and Ohio twenty-five years ago...to combat the divine truths defended by Missourians, and rally around their errors and heresies trying to make them victorious within the Lutheran church<sup>5</sup>...

As concerns conversion, election of grace, and scriptural analogy—the Iowans and Ohioans must be considered false prophets.<sup>6</sup>

Bente summarizes Missouri’s stance on fellowship with the Iowa and Ohio Synods: “No, we cannot accept these, our old adversaries, as weak brethren straying from the path of truth. We will never stop to show them the right way by word and letter, but we cannot join with them into communion of prayer and faith.”<sup>7</sup> And again at the end of his paper: “We have a heartfelt desire for brotherly union, especially with the Ohioans and Iowans. But to anticipate any form of real unity with unionistic tendencies—this we cannot, must not, and will not.”<sup>8</sup>

The members of the ALC, the Iowa and Ohio Synods, did not change their doctrinal view from before 1904 to the 1950s, but they kept the same attitude. Bente had explained that attitude in his paper and it was still true later on: “D. Jacobs does not only ask that Missouri, without further ado, join into public prayer communion with him, but also makes this anticipation of communion ‘conditio sine qua non’ for all future discussion of the unity of faith, etcetera.”<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid: 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid: 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid: 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid: 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid: 30.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid: 2.

members of the ALC continued to look past minor doctrinal differences in order to unite together. They anticipated a unity in faith that was not there yet.

The ALC had always taught and practiced this, so why would Missouri want to have fellowship negotiations with them? From 1939-1957, Missouri had formal talks toward fellowship with the ALC. So if the ALC had not changed doctrinally, Missouri must have changed. It was true that Missouri had clearly abandoned their position on the doctrine of fellowship, but when exactly did that happen?

In hindsight, one can read through the history books and see the slow decline fairly clearly, but what would a pastor or a synod leader, do at that time? How would he see the evidence and what would he do about it? This usually is the question when one wants to learn from history, “What can I learn from past mistakes?” However, it can also be phrased positively, “What can I learn from past success?”

John W. O. Brenner was a man who led the Wisconsin Synod through this period of slow decline by the Missouri Synod. He saw the slippery slope getting steeper in the Missouri Synod. What were some of his actions toward the situation? How did he carry out those actions? What can be learned from how he carried out those actions? This paper will demonstrate that John W. O. Brenner was the right man at the right time to lead the Wisconsin Synod as president in matters of intersynodical relations.

## **I. A LOOK INTO THE PERSONALITY OF JOHN W. O. BRENNER**

John W. O. Brenner had a unique personality which influenced intersynodical relations with Lutheran church bodies. Brenner had a very strong personality, but in a good way. Some would say that his bluntness would turn people off, but he was only blunt when he needed to be. He had a very good sense of humor and was cordial in person. However, when it came to meetings and matters of doctrine, he was all business. He liked things done in an orderly matter and would not stand for the doctrines of Scripture being ignored. Brenner had the personality that was needed in this time of intersynodical problems between the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods.

## **Founded on sound doctrine at an early age**

As Brenner grew up, he lived through a period of doctrinal disagreements between synods. One major disagreement was the Election Controversy. During and after this controversy, there was a realization that it was important for “pure doctrine” to be expressed clearly and stood on soundly. John P. Meyer explains how this controversy influenced Brenner along with many other students of the ministry at the time:

In the controversy our fathers had become aware that church formulations may be convenient to express some truth to a certain extent, but must always be used with care, and must be discarded if they open the door for error and are used to express an error. All doctrine must be drawn from the Scriptures. Scripture is the only legitimate source and the final judge of all doctrine, to which also all ecclesiastical formulations must yield. When Brenner entered Northwestern, this spirit, this awareness of the necessity of pure doctrine, based on the Scriptures alone, was very active in our Synod. This does not mean that the term “pure doctrine” was heard very extensively by the members, as was the case in some other circles—rather, a use of the term as a slogan or catchword was frowned on—but appreciation of pure doctrine was deep-rooted in men’s heart and mind and dominated all conduct. In this atmosphere Brenner received his training.<sup>10</sup>

Brenner had many influences during his student years at Northwestern College that shaped his personality and how he would influence the Lutheran world when he became President of the Wisconsin Synod. He experienced “military-type discipline, scholarly yet practical intelligence, a high regard for doctrinal precision, and an awareness of the need for the use of English in a still highly German Lutheran church body.”<sup>11</sup> Brenner took that necessity of being strong in doctrine seriously.

## **Strong leadership**

Brenner’s personality is one thing that influenced the delegates of the synod to vote him in as the 8<sup>th</sup> president of the Wisconsin Synod. He had a work ethic to get things done. He had a strong personality that would not be moved easily. When this personality was founded on the Scriptures and the confessions, it was a good thing.

The personality traits of Brenner were seen by his congregation at St. John’s 8<sup>th</sup> and Vliet. In the late 1970s, a person who was a member of St. John’s for over 50 years once said the best thing about St. John’s was “Pastor Brenner.” The majority of his congregation would

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<sup>10</sup> John P. Meyer, “President John Brenner,” (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary: Essay File, [ND], August 25, 2014): 3-4

<sup>11</sup> Mark Braun, “‘He was a man and a Christian’: The Life and Work of John W.O. Brenner”, *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, 27:1 (April 2009): 17

have likely agreed. Brenner was well-liked because of his faithfulness and care in his actions and decisions.<sup>12</sup>

What were these personality traits that made Brenner so well-liked? Brenner was viewed as a strong forceful leader which gained him much respect. At this time of history, “this forcefulness was a more popular attribute, more highly sought after and appreciated than in current times when the ideal leader seem to embody a more deliberate, sophisticated, professional, diplomatic smoothness, even when it comes to polemics and apologetics.”<sup>13</sup> In this sense, Brenner was much like Martin Luther. In a time of strong personalities and biting words, he had a tougher attitude and used stronger words than others would have used. Brenner was also admired for being one who was “in control.” He had a “sharp intellect...unwavering orthodoxy and firmness in decisions.”<sup>14</sup> “When he made decisions, he stuck to them.”<sup>15</sup> This personality was noticed by more than his congregation and the Wisconsin Synod. In the intro to his article about Brenner’s retirement, a writer for *The Milwaukee Sentinel* labeled Brenner as a “six-foot ramrod of Lutheran conservatism.”<sup>16</sup> (From this statement, the title of this paper is derived.)

However, these traits also caused Brenner to not be well-liked among some people. Because Brenner had a strong personality and was rather outspoken, he often rubbed people the wrong way. However, as his good friend John P. Meyer quotes E. E. Kowalke’s article, it wasn’t usually a bad thing that he did this:

It was to be expected that a man so forthright and outspoken as John Brenner would step on various toes, and he did step down hard on many toes, but those toes usually belonged to people who had their feet in places where they should not have been. It has been said that he criticized everything. Not everything. But he certainly was critical of whatever pretended to be good but was contrary to the truth of Scripture and hurtful to the church. He was sometimes sharp in his remarks, but that sharpness was provoked by sham, insincerity,

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan H., Rupprecht, “‘How are the Mighty Fallen’: St. John’s, Eighth and Vilet, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.” *WLS Senior Church History Paper* (April 4, 1978): 14. Mark Braun states that “Rupprecht gathered his information ‘almost exclusively from two primary sources.’” He made use of the 90<sup>th</sup>, 115<sup>th</sup>, and 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary booklets. In addition, he interviewed Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Ehlke. Mr. Ehlke was principal of St. John’s school for 40 years until it closed in 1961. Mrs. Ehlke was the daughter John Gieschen, a former teach of St. John’s. Rupprecht conducted two “extensive interviews” with the Ehlkes.”

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 14-15. This paper was written in 1978, but the way the “current times” are described also describe the times in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid: 15.

<sup>15</sup> Richard C, Schwerin, “A Biography of Pastor John William Otto Brenner” *WLS Senior Church History Paper* (December 11, 1976): 5

<sup>16</sup> James M. Johnston, “‘Pastor J. Brenner,’ Giant Among Lutherans, Retires” *The Milwaukee Sentinel* (July 12, 1958)



ostentation, or any pretended substitute for simple Christian truth. Outspoken he certainly was, but he was evangelical at the same time.

... There were people who neither liked nor admired Pastor Brenner. His direct manner irritated some people. But whether people liked him or not, they all respected him. He was a man and a Christian and a dedicated pastor of the flock of Christ.<sup>17</sup>

A leader needs to restrain his emotions especially when there is a heated discussion.

Brenner was involved in many heated discussions over his years as president, but even before his presidency he most likely restrained his emotions in situations in his congregation. John Meyer describes this aspect of Brenner's personality giving an example of it during his presidency.

Brenner had a well-developed sense of propriety, and violations of propriety displeased him. But he strove; no matter how provoking a situation might be, not to be influenced by his feelings, but to continue to treat the difficulty as objectively as possible. To illustrate, in 1935 the American Lutheran Church sent out to other Lutheran church bodies an invitation to meet for doctrinal discussions. When our Synod did not receive such invitation to participate, we assumed that likely the letter had been lost in the mail. A few years later, in a general meeting, a prominent member of the Missouri Synod publicly faulted the Wisconsin Synod for having ignored the invitation. When Brenner arose to explain that we had never received the invitation, sounds of disapprobation were heard from a certain section of the hall, which impressed the undersigned as an insipid display of vulgarity. But Brenner did not show any resentment; he continued to explain that a person should not be charged with a fault for not accepting an invitation, which he had never received. By the way, at the recent convention of the Synodical Conference Dr. Behnken acknowledged the fact that said invitation had not been sent to the Wisconsin Synod.<sup>18</sup>

For this strong un-faltering leadership, Brenner was chosen as president of the Wisconsin Synod.

### **A pastor before a president**

Brenner would order the priorities in his life as such: God, God's Word, his church, and then his family.<sup>19</sup> But inside the church, he was primarily a pastor, and secondly a president. "He detested politicking in church and synodical affairs."<sup>20</sup> "He did not desire office, but when he was elected to an office, he accepted it as a duty to the synod and he performed that duty with energy, without neglecting his congregation. He simply put in more hours and never desired to be relieved of his work in the congregation in order to give more time to official duties."<sup>21</sup> He

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<sup>17</sup> E. E., Kowalke, "Pastor John Brenner: A Man With a Strong and Wide Pastoral Interest," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 49 (November 4, 1962): 345-346.

<sup>18</sup> Meyer: 5.

<sup>19</sup> Schwerin: 5.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid: 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid: 1.

was so devoted to his congregational work that he rarely took a vacation and would only be absent from St. John's for synodical business.<sup>22</sup>

Brenner loved his pastoral duties so much that if the presidency had been a full-time job, he probably would not have accepted the position. He would often insist that the presidential policy be *Kein Praeses ohne Amt*—no presidency without the ministry. His stance was that every synodical official “ought to be in the active ministry to be in touch with its joys and sorrows.” He “dreadfully feared a growing, top-heavy synodical structure because of the natural temptation to speak *von oben herab*—to dictate ‘from headquarters.’” It was his opinion that if this was allowed to happen, “pure orthodoxy would consequently suffer.”<sup>23</sup> Today, with all the duties a president has, the office can no longer be a part-time job. It is really up to the president to not let this *von oben herab* attitude to take over, but still bring himself to the local congregation and among the people. A president must keep his mind on the bigger picture—local congregation and synod together.

Brenner was able to do this. He knew the needs of his local congregation and he knew the needs of his synod. Before he became president, he knew what was going on in the WELS and amongst other synods.

Brenner's interests in the kingdom of God always went beyond the confines of the local congregation. When the Synod decided to publish an English church paper and appointed Brenner as one of its editors, his horizon was automatically widened by the work of this position. The spirit in which he did his work may be seen from the very first article that he contributed to *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. I, No.1. It addressed itself to the elders of congregations: “Do not forget that your congregation stands in close relation to others in our Synod body.”—But a little more of this later on.<sup>24</sup>

Because Brenner was editor of *The Northwestern Lutheran* for so long, Brenner knew what was happening in the nation and world among synods.

We had Brenner as president at a very critical period in the history of our Synod. His general qualifications for the office have been set forth in Prof. Kowalke's evaluation above. We take a brief glance at the effect that his editorship of the *Northwestern Lutheran* had on his qualification for the presidency. As editor he carefully read the exchanges that came to his desk. In this way he gathered much information and acquired a good overview over events, conditions, trends in other church bodies, especially over developments within the Lutheran churches of this country. Such knowledge is very helpful to an official who is to represent his own church, and who has to make decisions and take action. ...

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<sup>22</sup> Rupprecht,: 15.

<sup>23</sup> Schwerin: 5-6.

<sup>24</sup> Meyer: 4-5.

By reading the exchanges regularly as editor of *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Brenner succeeded in reaching a close contact with the other churches, a fact that stood him in good stead when he became president.”<sup>25</sup>

Brenner looked on these issues around the nation and world with a pastoral heart. This heart he took with him when he became president.

### **All Business**

When it came down to meetings and conventions, Brenner was all business. He liked to get the job done and not to beat around the bush with unnecessary humor. In an informal survey conducted in September 2006, Professor Mark Braun gathered information from 36 pastors who got a chance to observe Brenner in action especially at meetings and conventions.<sup>26</sup> Dr. Braun summarized Brenner’s attitude well from those pastors’ observations:

“There was never any doubt about who was in charge.” He was a “no-nonsense parliamentarian.” When a half-baked or ill-conceived proposal reached the floor, Brenner would already have analyzed it before the speaker finished and would offer his evaluation. Speakers known for being long-winded would be reminded, “We are here to do business and not to preach.” He once warned a speaker: “No long perorations. Get to the point.” There was “no fooling around at a Brenner meeting.” Yet Brenner “was not a stickler for Roberts’ *Rules of Order*.” When someone once called him on a point of order, he replied, “Here we are evangelical.”<sup>27</sup>

In addition to this summary, there was one instance where Brenner was viewed as being rather harsh in his business approach. This memory might be from the 1953 Synod convention in Watertown.

Because “the auditorium was hot and so was the debate,” Brenner limited delegates to three minutes to speak, and he instructed the secretary to strike the gavel table when a speaker’s three minutes had elapsed and the speaker was to stop, even if he was in mid-sentence. One speaker known for his “loquaciousness” soon came to the microphone, but in three minutes “he couldn’t even get wound up.” Despite the pounding of the gavel, the speaker dared to go one more sentence, protesting, “But I haven’t even had a chance to tell you what my wife and I did on our honeymoon night.” The convention broke into raucous laughter, but Brenner reportedly took the gavel, banged it several times and shouted, “Silence! We don’t laugh at Synod Conventions.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Meyer: 5

<sup>26</sup> A possible disclaimer would be that these men were very young when they got to know Brenner. Brenner was by then in his late 70s or older. These men may have gotten to know a different mellowed side of Brenner if they met him in person instead as his reputation suggested.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Braun, “‘He was a man and a Christian’: The Life and Work of John W.O. Brenner” *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, 27:2 (October 2009): 32

<sup>28</sup> Ibid: 33

If Brenner attended a district or synod convention today, he would be horrified at the clapping and laid back atmosphere. Brenner was indeed a man of his times and stuck to them.

Brenner was all business when he chaired a meeting, but he didn't like the "politics." Sometimes he would more than happily let other officials do the business of a meeting, but he would still be attentive. Meyer describes him in this kind of situation: "Nothing escaped [Brenner] when he was in the chair—with one exception. If the assignment committee happened to meet in the morning after an especially trying midnight session, then he was inclined to sit back, light his pipe, and let the district presidents take over, since this was, after all, their business."<sup>29</sup> Brenner was able to defer business to district officers or others who were in a more appropriate position to handle an issue than he would be. Brenner chose not to interfere in situations that he knew others were more adequate to serve in. Even though Brenner was not always in charge of the meeting, he wanted those who were to be all business.

Brenner was often viewed as not being very social, but the only time most people were able to observe him was at a meeting or convention. At a synod convention he was seen "off on the side by himself smoking his pipe." Brenner was a social person and did not mind conversations. When in a meeting, he was all business and expected others to be the same, but when the meeting adjourned "he would light up his pipe and visit. People would gather around him and these visits would last far into the night," and from these visits he was remembered as "an interesting conversationalist."<sup>30</sup>

He was indeed a social person—though his wife, Anna, may have brought it out of him. After their marriage, the St. John's parsonage at 816 W Vliet was said to be "quickly transformed from bachelor quarters to active social club." Many guests frequented the parsonage such as close friends, Koehler and William Henckel, professors at the Seminary. Other guests included men from the Michigan Synod. Some of these frequent guests even included men from the Missouri Synod: Missouri Synod's President Friedrich Pfothhauer, and Professors Ludwig Fuerbringer and Theodore Graebner. Because Brenner was mostly seen as being all business at conventions, not many got to know who he was personally.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Meyer: 2

<sup>30</sup> Braun, "He was a man and a Christian": The Life and Work of John W.O. Brenner" *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, 27:2 (October 2009): 33

<sup>31</sup> Schwerin: 3.

## **Good sense of humor**

Because many people did not know him well, one part of his personality is not mentioned very often—his sense of humor. Brenner knew when to do business and when to have a good time. He lived in a time when “the Wisconsin Synod was ‘ruled’ by sarcasm.” He was not alone in cutting “people down with a sarcastic tongue.” He and his classmate, John P. Meyer, would often go back and forth with each other. At one meeting Meyer introduced a remark by saying he was “going to pretend to be a devil’s advocate.” Brenner’s instant rebuttal was “What do you mean ‘pretend’?”<sup>32</sup>

Brenner’s sarcasm was not limited to WELS circles.

On another occasion, a joint meeting of Missouri and Wisconsin representatives, the chairman referred to him as “Dr.” Brenner, to which Brenner replied, “Don’t get nasty.” This sarcastic response belied Brenner’s disturbance at Missouri men who had earned doctorates at liberal universities and seminaries and were feared to have been infected with dangerous theologies, which they were then introducing into their churches. Brenner’s response was regarded as his blunt way of saying, “Thanks, but no thanks!”<sup>33</sup>

This was not the only time Brenner’s personality or sense of humor came out while talking amongst Missourians.

## **Personality among Missouri members**

Brenner’s intellect and sharp-wittedness were able to turn sentences around rather quickly. In a meeting with certain officials of the Missouri synod, a Missouri man went on about a point he was trying to make in opposition to others. After he was finished, he asked the men in the room, “Have I made myself clear?” Brenner calmly took the pipe out of his mouth and responded, “Yes, but you haven’t cleared yourself.”<sup>34</sup>

Meyer describes, but also defends, Brenner’s blunt personality with Missourians:

His sharp tongue, it was sometimes said, aggravated the growing tension between the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods, but it will be noted that he did not force the issue or attempt to press his conviction down the throats of people who had not had the opportunities that had come his way to see in what direction Missouri’s policies were leading that synod. He knew what was bound to come and wanted to have it come as a result of conviction, not as an unwilling surrender to force.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Braun, “‘He was a man and a Christian’: The Life and Work of John W.O. Brenner” *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, 27:2 (October 2009): 33.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*: 33-34.

<sup>34</sup> John M. Brenner story (correspondence on September 24, 2014).

<sup>35</sup> Meyer: 3.

Some pastors had a chance to observe Brenner in action at meeting with the Missouri officials. As Dr. Braun records, some were impressed by “the forthright manner of the Wisconsin men led by Brenner” against “the ‘politicians’ of the Missouri group.” Many viewed Missouri leaders speaking with “a kind of smoothness or polish.” On the other side, Brenner and other Wisconsin men were known for being blunt, which would sometimes turn people off from them. One pastor recalled Brenner once protesting to Missouri President John Behnken, “You’re going out with the wrong girl!” Many would agree that “Brenner was certainly a man of his times, but in the end he may also have become a victim of his times. What was regarded in his prime as being faithful to Scripture, of sober judgment and proper in etiquette may have come to be taken by a later generation as harsh, stubborn or negative.”<sup>36</sup>

Let this quote from Meyer be taken seriously as this paper looks at how Brenner’s personality affected his presidency and synodical relations with the Missouri Synod:

Whether Brenner was aware of it or not, he always acted according to the principle which he together with his mates, at the suggestion of Dr. Ernst, had adopted as class motto in 1893—Latin, of course—*Praesens imperfectum, futurum perfectum*. We must remember that the present is always burdened with imperfections. Perfection is an ideal for which we must strive untiringly, but the attaining of which has been reserved for the future. In the words of Luther, as long as we are on earth, there is not a *Wesen* but a *Werden*.—Brenner was firm, but he would not force an issue—as long as there was hope for improvement.<sup>37</sup>

## II. JOHN W. O. BRENNER’S LEADERSHIP AS PRESIDENT

### Observing the yeast begin to spread in Missouri

As was mentioned at the beginning, Missouri did not always have the doctrinal stance on fellowship that they have now. Their stance was rather similar to that of the Wisconsin Synod. The question that needs to be answered is, “How and where did President Brenner see the Missouri Synod beginning to slip?”

It seems that the Missouri Synod had caught a bug and it was becoming more and more prevalent, but at the beginning it was faint. Since Lutheranism came to America there has always been desires to join together to do ministry. These desires to join would usually be

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<sup>36</sup> Braun, “‘He was a man and a Christian’: The Life and Work of John W.O. Brenner” *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, 27:2 (October 2009): 32.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*: 5.

stronger than the desires to keep firm in the truth of God's Word. Compromises were made and Scripture was diluted. This is often referred to as "unionism." In order to preserve the truth, there were church bodies that desired to stay separate and not unite, but they often became objects of ridicule and slander. The Missouri Synod saw this happening to them over issues such as the military chaplaincy, scouting, and lodges. All of a sudden, a sizable portion of the Missouri Synod cared more about their social reputation than they did about what Scripture had to say about the dangers involved in such programs. Missouri had caught the bug of "American Lutheranism."

This bug caused a civil war to arise in the Missouri Synod. It was more of a battle between conservatives and liberals in Missouri than Wisconsin versus Missouri. The conservatives appreciated Wisconsin's support and were disappointed when Wisconsin broke with Missouri in 1961. On the other hand, the liberals, who had contracted the bug, thought Wisconsin as a "ball and chain" holding them back from their path. The liberals were happy when Wisconsin broke because they were set free from another obstacle in their way. This bug of "American Lutheranism" was and is dangerous to a Christian's faith because it often results in the loss of God's truth.

President Brenner could sense this bug going around and the danger of it turning into an epidemic. In his presidential report to the WELS 1939 convention, he brings to attention and warns the delegates of the growing bug. He bases his devotion on the words of 2 Thessalonians 2:15-16<sup>38</sup> in which there is an urgency to stand firm to the teaching of the apostles.

In these days when we hear so often of "new challenges to the Church" and when there is an almost feverish activity in the churches, his calm but earnest "Stand fast!" may indeed sound strange to our ears.

Are we, then, to shut our eyes to the great changes that are taking place everywhere and to the conditions that surround us? No, indeed. We are to observe the life of the statesman and the economist, but from the standpoint of the child of God, who knows full well that even *external things may affect our inner life*. ...

In churches we find indifference in doctrine and practice and unionistic tendencies. The humanitarian religion of works is being spread most diligently. It reaches the ear and heart of our members, and no one can deny that it is full of appeal to the natural man within us. ...

When speaking of "standing fast, and holding the traditions," the apostle has in mind the living personal faith by which we lay hold on and cling to, Jesus, as our only hope in life and

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<sup>38</sup> "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word or our epistle. Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work."

in death. Mere intellectual knowledge of true doctrine and insistence on it do not benefit a man nor make him a contender for the faith after the heart of God.

Only he who daily rejoices in the “everlasting consolation and good hope” given him by grace through the Word can truly love the Word. And he will fight for the truth as for life itself, refusing to surrender one jot or tittle of the divine traditions, and rejecting any compromise with error. ...<sup>39</sup>

That “fever” or “bug” was going around and Brenner warned his synod about it.

### **Military chaplaincy**

The first instances Brenner saw this bug had to do with the military chaplaincy. Already in 1934, the Atlantic District of the Missouri Synod drafted a memorial to their Synod to set up an Army and Navy Commission to recommend men to the US government for service as ministry chaplains. There was a desire to serve their men who were in the service. In the following year, the US government made an official request to the Missouri Synod for military chaplains. So the Missouri Synod passed a resolution at their 1935 convention authorizing an Army and Navy commission to investigate the assurances which had been given that Missouri’s principles would be honored by the government.<sup>40</sup>

After receiving the same request from the US government, the 1937 Wisconsin Synod convention recommended to appoint a committee to look into the issue. The government had asked both President Brenner and district presidents for names of pastors that could serve in the chaplaincy program. He said he replied to the government, “My stand has been that we have no authority to do this as long as our Synod has not included such work in its program.” President Brenner had three questions that he wanted the appointed committee to answer for the 1939 convention: 1. Was there need for this work? 2. Would such service employed by the government be compatible with scriptural principles? 3. Should not the church body take on the obligation of paying its own missionaries?<sup>41</sup> The Committee on Chaplaincies at the 1937 convention stated that there was not enough information to go to make a decision at that time and “any pastor entering into such service is doing so without the sanction of the Synod until the Synod has definitely decided in this matter.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings, 1939: 8-10. The full devotion can be found in Appendix B.

<sup>40</sup> This saying that “Missouri’s principle would be honored” will come in again was the scouting issue when Scout leaders promise the same thing.

<sup>41</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings, 1937: 16.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 55.



At Wisconsin's 1939 convention the expanded Committee on Chaplaincies brought forth their report to the synod. The committee recommended that "after a thorough study of all the available information and literature is of the unanimous opinion that we do not commission pastors to function in this capacity according to governmental regulations." The committee answered President Brenner's three questions in their reasoning for their final decision: 1. It was not necessary to call pastors to this specific field because "any ordained pastor is at liberty to minister unto the men in service." 2. To call ordained pastors as commissioned chaplains in accordance with the rules and regulations of the government "is not in harmony with Scripture, because the fundamental principle of the separation of Church and state is thereby violated." 3. After being assured by the government that "such commissioned chaplains can practice sound doctrine and confessional Lutheranism, we fear that after a thorough study of [the rules and regulations] that it will become a practical impossibility for them when once in the service."<sup>43</sup> At the 1941, the committee reaffirmed its recommendation.

A summary of the problematic dangers with chaplaincy were in three areas: separation of church and state, church and ministry, and fellowship. Even though government said chaplains could practice sound doctrine and confessional Lutheranism, practically when in the service there may be times where the government would tell a chaplain that he had to serve other religions than his own. This would be a violation of the principle of church and state. It would be a violation of church and ministry according to the "call." If a pastor decided to serve as a military chaplain, neither the soldiers nor the Synod called him to serve. His call would be invalid and he would be serving only on his own. There were dangers in the area of fellowship because a chaplain would be asked to serve other religions and join with other ministers. This danger was brought to light in a widely circulated story "The Silver Cord" by a writer of *Christian Herald*.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings, 1939: 67-68

<sup>44</sup> Mark E., Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods: Events That Led to the Split between Wisconsin and Missouri*, Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003: 84-85. This story "told of the heroic account of four chaplains—Reformed and Methodist Pastors, a Roman Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi—who died aboard the USS *Dorchester* after their ship suffered repeated torpedo fire from a German submarine. ...the chaplains knelt together in prayer and linked arms as the ship went down. Though they were 'as far apart theologically as the poles are apart,' wrote the author, among them 'ran that silver cord of the Spirit which binds true men of God together in that spiritual camaraderie which only they and God can understand. They served one Church, and one alone, the Church Christ wants upon this earth. In that wild moment on the deck they swept away those senseless barriers between 'the churches,' that makes us purely, pitifully 'denominational.' They knew no creed here but the universal creed of faith unrationed, the common property of all men who believe, the mystic union which exists between

Meanwhile in the Missouri Synod, the issue of chaplaincy was not under control of the Synod. At this time Missouri only met every three years in convention. So by the time their next convention rolled around in 1938, the five-man Army and Navy Commission for Chaplains reported that several Missouri Synod pastors were already serving as chaplains in the armed forces. The Synod as a whole had not even made a decision concerning chaplaincy. These pastors were really serving on their own accord without a call, because Missouri had approved such activity in its 1935 convention. From these pastors the Army and Navy Commission received “reliable testimony” that chaplains could “function according to their respective creeds and conscientious practice in each case.” Chaplains were under the authority of their commanding officers, but they received no “dictation as to their spiritual ministry,” and so “the conscientious Lutheran chaplain can avoid all unionistic practices.” The committee also did not see the chaplaincy as violation of the doctrine of church and state. As a result of this favorable report, the Missouri Synod enters the government military chaplaincy program.<sup>45</sup>

So there was a change in Missouri’s position on chaplaincy from World War I to World War II. In 1918 Missouri’s President Pfoth drew a line when it came to cooperating in externals with the National Lutheran Commission. He announced that “a stand of absolute isolationism” was the only Christian position for Missouri Synod to take as they ministered to chaplains only to those they were in fellowship. This was the same position that Wisconsin took. However, already during World War I, there were those who disagreed with Missouri’s stance. In 1935 newly elected President Behnen orchestrated a committee to look into if they could call men to work as chaplains without breaking scriptural principles. The committee concluded that “in offering our men for the chaplaincy there is no departure from the accepted Scriptural position of our Synod on the separation of State and Church.” Thus Missouri departed from their previous policy.<sup>46</sup> By 1941 Theodore Graebner<sup>47</sup>, a recognized spokesman of typical Missouri views, illustrated that the approved *modus operandi* for conducting chaplaincy work was indeed

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Christ and the children of God whether they worship in Protestant meeting houses, Catholic cathedrals, or Jewish synagogues.” This was yet another reminder of the spirit and bug that was going around America.

<sup>45</sup> Missouri Proceedings, 1938: 161.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Braun. “Changes in the Wisconsin Synod” *CHARIS Journal* 5 (Lent 2006): 5.

<sup>47</sup> Mark Braun compares Brenner to Graebner, “In some ways, the careers of Graebner and Brenner ran on a parallel course. Graebner was not Pieper just as Brenner was not Meyer, but they both recognized early on the value of using English were the public voices of their respective synods’ views.”

cooperating in externals. Graebner mentions that Missouri never admitted that their position in World War I had been a mistaken one.<sup>48</sup>

Starting with those favorable reports of pastors serving as military chaplains, Missouri now embraced the position and was applauded by the rest of the nation for doing so. Missouri had the desire to be accepted by the American public and to have good press. Throughout World War II, Missouri's *Lutheran Witness* wrote about those "heroic deeds" of chaplains and emphasized that they strengthened Missouri's public image and pointed others in the country to the Lutheran Church.<sup>49</sup>

Wisconsin on the other hand received much heat for not being involved in the military chaplaincy program. As America's involvement in World War II began, Brenner reinforced Wisconsin's position in dealing with the situation: "We do not find that the present emergency demands a change in the nature of its work." Church and state were to remain separate. The church's work was to remain "purely spiritual in nature." The Synod would try to find ways to meet the spiritual needs of their members. However, this stance came under heat from both outside and inside the synod because it seemed limited and not loving.<sup>50</sup>

Brenner as president received much of the heat for the Synod's position on chaplaincy. Brenner received a letter on May 8, 1941 from WELS pastor, Harold Warnke, who laid out his disapproval of the Synod's stance.

That resolution which our Synod passed regarding army and navy chaplains has been bothering me for some time—particularly since I registered no disapproval at the time.

According to all present indications our own boys as well as hundreds of thousands who belong to no church, will soon be fighting. If anyone needs the Word of God, they do. We have it—but we are not giving it to them.

Could we not call some men to work in our armed forces immediately? If we wait till Synod meets (and perhaps many months after that), it will be late, perhaps too late for some of these boys.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods: Events That Led to the Split between Wisconsin and Missouri*, Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003: 81. In a personal comment reviewing this thesis, Mark Braun pointed out that "Missouri historians try to argue today that Missouri has always been in favor of the chaplaincy, and they cite Walther's approval of a chaplain in the civil war as part of their proof. But they also say that the Missouri Synod in convention never opposed the chaplaincy. To me that would be comparable to saying that since one cannot point to any specific Synodical statements opposing same-sex marriage, that therefore Missouri "had no position" on gay marriage until the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

<sup>49</sup> Braun. "Changes in the Wisconsin Synod" *CHARIS Journal* 5 (Lent 2006): 5.

<sup>50</sup> John, Brenner, "The Church and 'War Work'" *The Northwestern Lutheran* 29 (November 29, 1942): 374-375.

<sup>51</sup> Pastor Harold E. Warnke, Princeton, WI to John Brenner, (John W.O. Brenner papers, file 118, WELS archives, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library, Mequon, Wis.)

Warnke's concern for the souls of Wisconsin Synod soldiers should be appreciated and respected. However, Brenner gave a very logical response to this letter:

You deplore the fact that our Synod took such a stand on the chaplaincies, and ask: 'Could we not call some men to work in our armed forces immediately?'

Even if our Synod had nominated from six to ten men and they had been given chaplaincies, how many of our own men, do you think, would we reach through them? As to sending civilian pastors to the vicinity of camps, that is the very thing we are planning to do as soon as we have done the necessary survey. The Missouri Commission, well-equipped as it is, has made but little more progress than we have in this respect. To give service to all our men is a thing that is impossible. The most we will be able to do is to place men near camps where we have larger groups.

As to the question of the chaplaincies—we are still bound by the resolution of our Synod. We have given the matter much study, and I am not inclined to believe that the Synod will reverse itself.<sup>52</sup>

Publically Brenner addressed the chaplaincy issue during WWII. At Wisconsin's 1941 convention saying that Wisconsin's position on the military chaplaincy was "not shared by other Lutherans, and it seems, by some of our own members."<sup>53</sup> In a Northwestern Lutheran article, Brenner expressed his belief that wartime pressures should not be allowed to alter the Synod's stand: "We do not find that the present emergency demands a change in the character of true leadership in the Church or in the nature of its work."<sup>54</sup>

In 1950, some Wisconsin pastors still raised questions about the Synod's position.

Brenner replied to one pastor:

We have, for instance, offered the Department [of Defense] to send men if they would be permitted to minister to our members in the service as they minister to our members at home. But the Government makes the chaplain the pastor of some, I believe, 1,200 men, the most of whom may not be members of his denomination, to preach to them in health, in sickness, and in the face of death. To endorse the present chaplaincy setup, means to declare ourselves satisfied to have a Catholic priest or a Jewish rabbi minister to the spiritual needs of our men.<sup>55</sup>

As Brenner received heat for the Synod's position, he continued to hold a proper attitude in leadership. This is where Brenner's sternness in sound doctrine came through as a leader for the Wisconsin Synod. However, though stern in doctrine, he lovingly explained the Synod's position to those who were confused by it.

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<sup>52</sup> John Brenner to Pastor Harold Warnke, May 23, 1941 (John W.O. Brenner papers, file 118, WELS archives, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library, Mequon, Wis.)

<sup>53</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings, 1941: 13.

<sup>54</sup> John Brenner, "The Church and 'War Work,'" *The Northwestern Lutheran* 29 (November 29, 1942): 374-375.

<sup>55</sup> John Brenner to Rev. A.L. Mennicke, June 2, 1950 (John W.O. Brenner papers, file 36, WELS archives, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library, Mequon, Wis.)

## Scouting and lodges

A second place where President Brenner saw this bug in the Missouri Synod was in the involvement with scouting and lodges. These organizations were gaining popularity in America even before Brenner was president and continued after his presidency. America began to crave organizations. Scouting was tolerated and even being encouraged in public schools. However, scouting and lodges had many dangers to them.

Just like chaplaincy the major danger of scouting is unionism. Scouting compromises “a league where boys of all confessions and creeds are banded together on oath to ‘do their duty to God’—unionism in its worst form.” Besides overall unionism, there are more specific dangers involved with scouting.

There is a “religious element” to scouting. The Boy Scout’s oath itself lays out some of those religious elements:

On my honor I will do my best  
To do my duty to God and my country  
and to obey the Scout Law;  
To help other people at all times,  
To keep myself physically strong,  
mentally awake, and morally straight.<sup>56</sup>

First of all, the oath is an *unnecessary* oath. Second, the oath is sworn to some generic god—generic so any religious or non-religious denomination can swear it. Thirdly, the oath clearly supports a “work-righteous” attitude. The Scout swears to do his duty to “God” and his country and to “obey the Scout Law.”<sup>57</sup>

Before Brenner was president, he warned about the danger of scouting because there was a “religious element” to it:

There is a religious element in Boy Scoutism, but the religion it has is not the religion of the Bible but that of the natural man. Reverence is to be inculcated, but not reverence for the Triune God, for that would be too sectarian. Character is to be developed and virtues are to be instilled, but without the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Sufficient cause for concern to every confessor of Christ and, therefore, sufficient reason for refusing our approval and support and warning our boys against this organization.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Boy Scouts of America, “Boy Scouts: Scout Oath” (accessed November 28, 2014) [www.scouting.org/scoutsource/BoyScouts.aspx](http://www.scouting.org/scoutsource/BoyScouts.aspx)

<sup>57</sup> The Scout Law according to [scouting.org](http://scouting.org) is “A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.”

<sup>58</sup> John Brenner, “Boy Scouts and the Navy” *Northwestern Lutheran*, 16 (March 31, 1929): 100.

Brenner also illustrated the connection scouting and lodges had with each other. The April 1923 *Elks Magazine*, a well-known lodge magazine, declared that “as many as 200 troops of the Boy Scouts are being looked after by the Elk lodges.” Concerning this statement, Brenner wrote in a Northwestern Lutheran article:

We are not at all surprised. When the Elks look after the Boy Scouts they are looking after their own, just as a father looks after his children. They Boy Scout movement is an offspring of the lodge. It has the same ‘undenominational’ religion, the same attempt to effect righteousness without Christ, the common brotherhood of man..., an oath, secret signs of recognition, and so forth.

Later on in the article Brenner cites the Missouri spokesman, Theodore Graebner, because he states that Scouts often were required to attend worship services of social gatherings of other churches, not just their own. Brenner said this was “proof enough that the official attitude of the Boy Scouts makes it impossible for a church to have its own Scouts.” To the point that churches desired to have organized Scout troops to look after, Brenner concludes, “Let the lodges look after the Boy Scouts, but let the churches maintain their testimony against them by word and deed!”<sup>59</sup>

Before Brenner was president, early on the Missouri Synod’s shared the same position on scouting with the Wisconsin Synod. Theodore Graebner led the Missouri Synod in opposing scouting. Graebner was against scouting because of their moral and religious purpose—ignoring original sin and the need for repentance. In 1916 Graebner wrote many articles against scouting in *Der Lutheraner*. Graebner once labeled the Boy Scouts as “a preparatory school for Freemasonry and for the lodges in general.” Brenner would have agreed with Graebner’s position on scouting originally.

However, Missouri eventually changed its position because Theodore Graebner changed his position. Graebner got too involved with Scout officials and they pleaded for him to reconsider their organization. As a result already in the 1920s, Missouri’s position on scouting was weakening. In 1927 Graebner wrote:

Our former and principle objection to scouting falls. When a troop is organized within one of our congregations, that troop committee has entire control of the troop. In other words, the boys can no longer, on penalty of losing their good standing as Scouts, be expected to

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<sup>59</sup> John Brenner, “Elks Look After Boy Scouts” *Northwestern Lutheran* 10 (May 20, 1923): 147

attend rallies in sectarian churches or unionistic Scout service. When in camp, the Lutheran boys are not expected to take part in the general religious service.<sup>60</sup>

Graebner was fooled and blinded by the Scout officials. Again even if they did not say it outright, the Missouri Synod had a desire to be accepted by the American public and not to feel the pressure of social heat. It is possible Graebner was also fed up with the narrow, legalistic attitudes of some conservatives in the Missouri Synod, even though they may have been correct doctrinally.

In the first decade of Brenner's presidency, scouting was beginning to trend in Missouri because of Graebner's influence. Missouri's 1932 convention approved the report of its Board for Young People's Work, recognizing that they could not "endorse the Boy Scout Movement in its present state" and acknowledged the "willingness of officials of this organization to remove objectionable features" that Missouri disagreed with.<sup>61</sup> The 1935 convention continued to follow that path and by the 1938 convention, they adopted the report that "the national headquarters of the Boy Scout organization have so modified their position as to grant to the individual congregation complete control of its troop and that the member of such church troops are in no wise required to take part in any activities which are contrary to Scripture." However, at this time the committee still warned that "because of the naturalistic and unionistic tendencies still prevalent in the Boy Scout movement, membership in non-Lutheran or sectarian troops cannot be sanctioned."<sup>62</sup> Missouri confirmed the Boy Scout official's word that church groups were not required to participate in activities contrary to biblical principles, but Missouri did not make an official decision yet. At its 1944 convention, Missouri made that decision and adopted that scouting should be left up to the individual congregation to decide if it is right for them or not. These are the exact words that Missouri's 1944 convention adopted:

Your synodical committees obtained all the official handbooks both for scouts and scoutmasters, covering every phase of the work, and examined these for any ingredients of the program that would militate against a Lutheran scoutmaster's committing himself to this program. We were unable to find any factors which would violate our principles and have not been able to discover anything in the practices of scouting, as outlines in these handbooks, to which a Christian parent, scoutmaster, or pastor would take exception. Moreover, a Lutheran Committee on Scouting has issued a manual entitled *Scouting in the Lutheran Church*, which definitely claims for the pastors and congregations the sole and

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<sup>60</sup> Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods: Events That Led to the Split between Wisconsin and Missouri*, Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003: 108

<sup>61</sup> Missouri Proceedings, 1932: 110

<sup>62</sup> Missouri Proceedings, 1935: 106f.; 1938, 342

unrestricted right of the Lutheran church committee...to control everything of a religious nature that is to be superimposed upon the official scout program... Accordingly, your Committee believes that the matter of scouting should be left to the individual congregation to decide and that under the circumstances Synod may consider her interests sufficiently protected.<sup>63</sup>

This was the first time Missouri had made a decision without talking to its sister synods of the Synodical Conference.

At first the Wisconsin Synod was shocked and hurt by Missouri's decision. At Wisconsin's 1945 convention, Brenner's first public reaction to Missouri's changed position was a reinforced stance against scouting:

We hold that the Scout program still contains elements of religion; that it perverts the teachings of Holy Scriptures; and that; therefore, the Scriptures bid us to avoid it. According to our firm convictions, the book "Scouting In The Lutheran Church", which is the product of a joint committee of Lutherans not of one fellowship, is rendering our Lutheran Church an outstanding disservice."<sup>64</sup>

Up to this point, Wisconsin could count on Missouri standing side by side with them to battle against unionistic issues such as scoutism.

Brenner and the Standing Committee on Church Union later wrote a document entitled, "Memorial to the Missouri Synod in the Matter of Scouting," to Missouri's 1947 convention. In this memorial, Brenner and the Committee explained the difference of opinion between the two synods and asked Missouri to reconsider their 1944 resolution on Scouting. As one reads it, he can hear the pleadings of these men:

We feel constrained to make this appeal because of the many years during which our Synods were united in their stand against participation of our young people in either the Boy or Girl Scouts of America. During that time we were strengthened by the reports of your committees and by pamphlets issued by some of your leading theologians.

All this was changed in 1944 by your acceptance of a report which gives to Scouting a clean bill of health, commends an official manual entitled 'Scouting in the Lutheran Church,' and gives assurance that the interests of Synod are sufficiently protected by the concession which have been made. Since then, the number of troops in your Synod has multiplied rapidly, resulting in great difficulties, especially in such fields where our Synods are working side by side, and creating grave and dangerous strains.<sup>65</sup>

The Committee attached to the memorial their own study of boy scoutism so as to point out that the unionistic features still exist in the group.

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<sup>63</sup> Missouri Proceedings 1944: 102.

<sup>64</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings 1945: 11.

<sup>65</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings, 1947: 104-105.



It seemed after Missouri made and supported their resolution on scouting, members of Missouri were very condescending to Wisconsin. One pastor recalled in a meeting where the Scouting issue came up, Carl Lawrenz asked a Missouri man, “Since you now support the Scouts, who has changed? The Scouts, the Missouri Synod, or both?” The Missouri man replied, “No one has changed. We have become enlightened.” Graebner would now turn his attention toward Wisconsin urging them that enlightenment was exactly what they needed too. He would direct his accusations saying that Wisconsin was too legalistic and they had “a complete hardening of their doctrinal arteries.”<sup>66</sup> As Brenner noted earlier, it was true that even Lutheran churches were loosening up their grip on the issue of scouting.

When the press found out that Missouri was tolerant of scouting and Wisconsin was not, Wisconsin found themselves at the end of America’s whip again as they did with the chaplaincy. Basically the press was saying if Wisconsin Synod was “Anti-Scouting” then they were “Anti-American.” Writers of the Princeton, Wisconsin *Times—Republic* in 1950 a couple times directed their accusation against the Wisconsin Synod specifically. A writer bluntly put it saying “the Wisconsin Synod of the Lutheran Church has struck a low blow to the very heart of American Youth.” Another made the point that “the Wisconsin Synod does not have the right to oppose these American organizations” and “it cannot do so and still enjoy the respect of the people in this country.”<sup>67</sup> Wisconsin’s opposition to Scouting in addition to their position on chaplaincy really brought about much hostility from the American public. These were some of the issues Brenner had to face while president.

### **“Joint Prayer” vs. “Prayer Fellowship”**

A third place where Brenner saw this bug in the Missouri Synod was when Missouri made a distinction between “joint prayer” and “prayer fellowship” at its 1944 convention. In certain situations, Missouri declared that it was not wrong to pray with a denomination it was not in fellowship with. This paragraph from Missouri’s 1944 convention summarizes and clarifies its point:

Joint prayer at intersynodical conferences, asking God for His guidance and blessings upon the deliberations and discussions of His Word, does not militate against the resolution of the

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<sup>66</sup> Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods: Events That Led to the Split between Wisconsin and Missouri*, Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003: 112

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*: 118

Fort Wayne Convention, provided that such prayer does not imply denial of truth or support of error. Local conditions will determine the advisability of such prayer. Above all, the conscience of a brother must not be violated nor offense be given.<sup>68</sup>

This distinction was reaffirmed both at Missouri's 1947<sup>69</sup> and 1953<sup>70</sup> convention.

Certain questions come up in one's mind: "Why make this distinction? What is the motivation behind it? What was the need for this distinction?" Bente made Missouri's stance clear in 1905 that there could be no prayer with those Missouri was not in fellowship with. As the next section will illustrate, Missouri desired fellowship with the American Lutheran Church (ALC). Perhaps the distinction was made so that Missouri could have closer ties with the ALC. Yet, in making this distinction, Missouri was loosening its grip on the importance of Scriptural principles in order to gain fellowship—loss of truth in compromise.

This distinction not only offended Wisconsin and the ELS, but there was much controversy in the Missouri Synod itself. At Missouri's 1950 convention, much disagreement was recorded officially. A minority report stated that "the synodical committee rightly holds that this distinction has no validity." Thus the committee resolved "That there is no Scriptural basis for a distinction between 'prayer fellowship' and 'joint prayer,' and that our Synod regards these expressions as synonymous" and "that joint worship with the heterodox is contrary to Rom. 16:17; Titus 3:10; 2 John 10-11; 2 Thess. 3:6."<sup>71</sup> There was such an offense taken that the synod was concerned about restoring synodical unanimity. Therefore pastoral conferences were asked to restudy the matter "in order that the issues may be clarified and the term 'prayer fellowship' be more accurately defined."<sup>72</sup> Two men, Dr. Herman Harms (Missouri) and Dr. Norman A. Madson (ELS), were asked to write doctrinal essays on the topic of "prayer fellowship."

It was not until after Brenner's presidency was completed that he was recorded to have said anything official about this distinction. During his presidency he would often have Professor Edmund Reim speak on such matters. After Brenner stepped down, his successor, President O. J. Naumann asked him to be an advisory member of the committee Brenner appointed while he was president, the Standing Committee in Matter of Church Union. In

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<sup>68</sup> Missouri Proceedings 1944: 251-252

<sup>69</sup> Missouri Proceedings 1947: 517-518

<sup>70</sup> Missouri Proceedings 1953: 551-552

<sup>71</sup> Missouri Proceedings 1950: 510-512.

<sup>72</sup> Missouri Proceedings 1953: 552.

February 1954, this committee met with other similar committees of the other synods in the Synodical Conference. Thus they formed The Committee on Intersynodical Relations, the three synods<sup>73</sup> discussed the two essays by Harms and Madson. Pastor Arthur P. Voss started the discussion by asking the question: “Is the distinction between prayer fellowship and joint prayer one made *by Scripture* or is it one brought about *out of consideration for individual circumstances?* What establishes principles?” (emphasis added)<sup>74</sup> After studying Harms’ essay, Brenner states:

First, I would like to have [Harms] show where Scripture make the distinction between church fellowship and prayer fellowship or joint prayer. I maintain that the Holy Ghost deals with the individual. Second, I challenge the statement that we cannot hold the members of the ALC responsible for the errors of their fathers, while they are living in the same sins, spreading the same false doctrine, etc. If they are sincere, they should know why we cannot prayer with them.<sup>75</sup>

Later on Brenner points to the danger of making this distinction as Missouri and ALC desire fellowship together.

Does the prayer affect the man with whom I pray? Does not the Word that I speak to him have to convince him? Acts 20 tells us to take heed to the flock over which the Holy Ghost has made us overseers. It then warns us against grievous wolves from without and from within. The ALC has all along shown that they do not come as weak brethren. They are reaching out their other hand in all other directions.<sup>76</sup> You have not converted them. They do not consider you the stronger brother who is to uplift them, the weaker ones.<sup>77</sup>

This distinction was only the tip of the iceberg of the greater issue at hand with Missouri—fellowship. The next section will focus more on this issue as Missouri desired fellowship with the ALC without the favor of its sister synods.

### **Desired fellowship with the American Lutheran Church (ALC)**

As this bug grew in the Missouri Synod, President Brenner saw it in Missouri’s persistent desires to join in fellowship with the American Lutheran Church (ALC). It was hard to

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<sup>73</sup> The Slovak Synod representative were absent.

<sup>74</sup> Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee on Intersynodical Relations (Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee: February 25-26, 1954) (John W. O. Brenner papers, file 96, WELS archives, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library, Mequon, Wisconsin): 2.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid: 4.

<sup>76</sup> At the time, the ALC was reaching out to other Lutheran organizations such as the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA), which was considered liberal and loose in doctrine.

<sup>77</sup> Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee on Intersynodical Relations (Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee: February 25-26, 1954) (John W. O. Brenner papers, file 96, WELS archives, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library, Mequon, Wisconsin): 5.

understand at first why Missouri moved in this direction given the history behind the Missouri Synod and the predecessors to the ALC. As put in the introduction, Friedrich Bente's 1904 essay laid out why Missouri could not be in fellowship with the Ohio and Iowa synods. The chaplaincy issue began between World War I and World War II; the scouting issue started early as organizations in America began to dominate; but this issue with the ALC began later in Brenner's presidency. Over time the bug Missouri contracted became more prevalent especially when Missouri disregarded Wisconsin's warns about the dangers of such moves of fellowship. Missouri's stance changed dramatically between 1904 and 1944.

There were always free conferences and talks that looked forward to the possibility of Lutheran churches joining together. Missouri hoped the Iowa and Ohio synods would become more conservative, while Iowa and Ohio hoped Missouri would loosen up a bit. In 1929 the "Chicago Theses" were drafted by the Intersynodical Committee made up of committees from the various Lutheran synods. The "Chicago Theses" were rejected by Missouri in their 1929 convention. The result of this rejection was the drafting of the "Brief Statement" three years later, which stood as *the* statement Missouri would use as the basis for future fellowship discussions for the next couple decades.

The 1930s began with the United Lutheran Church of American (ULCA) to the left, the Synodical Conference to the right, and the ALC in between the two. At its 1935 convention, the Missouri Synod had an invitation from both the ULCA and the ALC to have talks for fellowship. After meeting with the ULCA, Missouri realized it was not possible to have more talks because of the ULCA's stance on Scripture. Missouri continued to talk to the ALC. Being in the middle the ALC saw it as their duty to bring all the Lutherans together.

After the Missouri Synod rejected the "Chicago Theses" and drafted the "Brief Statement," the ALC made another attempt to have talks with Missouri. The "Brief Statement" was a solid confession, but the ALC could not accept just the "Brief Statement." The ALC drafted their own document, "Declaration of Representatives of the American Lutheran Church" ("Declaration"), and desired that both documents be used for future fellowship discussions. Missouri's 1938 convention agreed to use these two documents together.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Missouri Synod theologian, Francis Pieper was behind the drafting of the excellent "Brief Statement." It is thought Pieper was holding back many liberal Missouri Synod pastors. However, after he died, these pastors came out of hiding and this move in a direct result of the influence of these pastors. Therefore, this is one mark of the beginning of a civil war in the Missouri Synod.

There were warning signs in the ALC that should have turned Missouri off. It is not a surprise that the Iowa, Ohio, and Buffalo synods brought their doctrine into the ALC. Their doctrine had not changed since before the election controversy.<sup>79</sup> The Iowa Synod's view of "open questions"<sup>80</sup> still found its way into ALC public statements. The 1938 ALC convention stated, "We are firmly convinced that it is neither necessary nor possible to agree in all non-fundamental doctrine." Perhaps Missouri was still attempting to make the ALC more conservative by their influence. However, the opposite was the case here—the ALC making Missouri more lenient. These fellowship discussions are what led President Brenner to appoint a committee to look into these discussions and prepare a report for Wisconsin's 1939 convention. This committee would later be known as "The Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union."

### **The Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union**

The appointment of "The Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union" was one of the most influential things Brenner did during his presidency. Brenner's pastoral heart came out on a much bigger level than in the local congregation. President Brenner saw the growing problems in Missouri, so he took action to help Wisconsin's sister synod. This committee, which Brenner chaired, would help clear up communication between synods, strengthen doctrinal ties, and hopefully prevent misinterpretations.

The committee was first known as "The Committee on Agreement between the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church." It was made up of the Conference of Presidents with the faculty of the Theological Seminary at Thiensville. By this committee, an executive committee was appointed, consisting of Presidents Brenner, Bergmann, Kirchner, and Pankow; Professors Lehninger and Meyer; and Pastor Edmond Reim. The main purpose of the committee was to look at the two documents, Missouri's "Brief Statement" and the ALC's "Declaration,"

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<sup>79</sup> In that controversy Tensions had grown high between Missouri and these synods because they called C. F. W. Walther, "a Calvinist," for his stance in the controversy.

<sup>80</sup> "Open questions" are issues in Scripture that are not clearly laid out. However, the Iowa synod labeled some doctrines in Scripture as "open questions" even though they are clear in Scripture. Iowa's focus was always on the fundamental doctrines of Scripture—those which are necessary for salvation. The danger is that if someone tears one page out of Scripture, who is to stop him from tearing more.

and bring a recommendation to Wisconsin's 1939 convention.<sup>81</sup> As issues developed in the Missouri Synod, further need for this committee was later recognized by the Synod.

After this committee looked over the two documents, they brought their findings to the 1939 convention. The members of the committee observed that the "Declaration" did not "state the truth clearly" and did not exclude error in the disputed doctrines. They also made note that the ALC had reached an agreement with the ULCA on the doctrine of inspiration in which "a *clear* confession to the inerrancy of the Scriptures" was lacking. They concluded that the condition the "Brief Statement" must be viewed in the light of the "Declaration" was unacceptable. "Not two statements should be issued as a basis for agreement; a single joint statement, covering the contested doctrines thetically and antithetically and accepted by both parties to the controversy, is imperative" *and* "such doctrinal statement must be made in clear and unequivocal terms which do not require laborious additional explanations." The statement must not only be put on paper but "must also be evidenced by a clean church practice."<sup>82</sup>

Once this report was submitted to the convention, another committee appointed to consider the conclusion brought their recommendations to the floor. They noted that there was "no real doctrinal basis for church fellowship" between Missouri and the ALC and that "future negotiations for establishing church fellowship would involve a denial of the truth and would cause confusion and disturbance in the Church and ought therefore to be suspended for the time being." The committee recommended that the Wisconsin Synod address a letter to Missouri informing them of their stand and that President Brenner "appoint a committee of which he himself shall be a member," which would serve "to gather carefully all available information on current union endeavors within the Lutheran Church and to report" back to the Synod. The recommendations were adopted and "The Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union" was born—though it was not called such until Wisconsin's 1943 convention.

As chairman of the committee Brenner appointed Edmund Reim as secretary and his lead point man in the committee. Professor Reim was an obvious choice for this position. He had been known to deal with these issues in the past. In 1935 he had given a paper at the Synod convention entitled "Church Fellowship and Its Implications." And in 1940, he delivered another essay in response to an invitation from the United Lutheran Church (ULC). Under the

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<sup>81</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings, 1939: 59.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid: 59-60.

title, “The Strength of Christian Unity,” he discussed in detail the growing problems in the present situation between Missouri and Wisconsin. Professor Reim had his feet planted in God’s Word and was well prepared to discuss the doctrines in questions with other synods. Much of Brenner’s opinion and firmness would be voiced through Professor Reim.<sup>83</sup>

Every following Wisconsin convention the committee brought reports on what was going on among the synods. Every year there was something to report as issues were rising. Every year there was action that needed to be taken—some years more than others. The length of the report often illustrates the growing problems as the reports got longer every year. In these committee reports, Brenner’s influential voice came out publicly to the Wisconsin Synod and beyond.

### **1941 - Wisconsin Synod Convention**

At the 1941 convention, the committee reported the initial discussions and observations they had had with the Missouri Synod. In the last two years, the committee had a chance to meet with the Missouri Committee on Lutheran Church Union (once alone and twice together with similar committees of the small Norwegian Synod, and Slovak Synods). In those meetings, Wisconsin attempted to convince Missouri that Wisconsin’s position was correct at their last convention.

Missouri rejected their position, but there were positives looking to the future. Missouri recognized the necessity of a single confessional document be drafted for Missouri and ALC discussions. In the future, Missouri “acknowledged that the proper course will be to submit, before final action by the Synod, any confessional document that may be agreed on, not only to its own conferences for study and suggestion, but also to the sister synods of the Synodical Conference.”<sup>84</sup>

The Committee recommended not to change the synod’s position at their 1939 convention because certain details confirmed their position. First, the ALC continued to act in its position of being the “in-between” synod and had relations with Synods of the American Lutheran Conference. No matter what objections Wisconsin and Missouri raised, the ALC

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<sup>83</sup> Martin Wildauer, “Professor Edmund Reim—A Man of Principle (A brief summary of events surrounding the resignation of Professor Reim).” (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary: Essay File, November 30, 2014); available from [www.wlsessays.net/files/WildauerEReim.pdf](http://www.wlsessays.net/files/WildauerEReim.pdf).

<sup>84</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings 1941: 74.

declared that they were “not willing to give up a relationship of ten years for one that does not yet exist.” At the American Lutheran Conference convention in 1940, ALC President declared that the ALC had no intention of leaving the American Lutheran Conference. The American Lutheran Conference’s “strategic position” between the left wing ULC and the right wing Missouri was never renounced. The ALC always intended to bring Lutherans together even if it meant losing some of the truth. Second, Wisconsin’s position in 1939 did not violate any principles of Scripture. Third, it would be dangerous to continue negotiating with the ALC—dangerous for any member of the Synodical Conference. “To continue negotiations under present conditions will...turn testifying into denying. It will create the impression of ‘dickering’ in confessional matter, will confirm the opponents in their ‘unfirm attitude,’ and will continue to cause confusion and disturbance in the Church.”<sup>85</sup>

At Missouri’s convention earlier in 1941, a resolution was adopted to invite representatives of the Synodical Conference to the discussions between Missouri and the ALC.<sup>86</sup> To this the committee stated, “Our answer must obviously be in the negative.” Because of the ALC’s clear loose stance on matters of the doctrine, Wisconsin had no desire to attend discussion with them.

Last of all the committee observed how the actions of Missouri endangered the Synodical Conference. First, Missouri independently continued to plot its own course of action even though the Synodical Conference advised “close co-operation” so there could be checks and balances. Second, a conference in the Missouri Synod approved a mission with other synods. Third, articles in Missouri’s *American Lutheran* declared there was a “change of sentiment” for the better in Missouri because more “forward-looking leaders” were coming to power and could

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid: 75-77.

<sup>86</sup> It is interesting to note that this is the first invitation to such discussions by either the ALC or the Missouri. This was done purposefully because the ALC knew they did not have a chance to convince Wisconsin. Professor J. P. Meyer describes what happened in 1935 when Wisconsin did not receive an invitation: “in 1935 the American Lutheran Church sent out to other Lutheran church bodies an invitation to meet for doctrinal discussions. When our Synod did not receive such invitation to participate, we assumed that likely the letter had been lost in the mail. A few years later, in a general meeting, a prominent member of the Missouri Synod publicly faulted the Wisconsin Synod for having ignored the invitation. When Brenner arose to explain that we had never received the invitation, sounds of disapprobation were heard from a certain section of the hall, which impressed the undersigned as an insipid display of vulgarity. But Brenner did not show any resentment; he continued to explain that a person should not be charged with a fault for not accepting an invitation, which he had never received. (Representatives of the American Lutheran Church at a subsequent meeting with our Church Union Committee frankly admitted that in 1935 they had not sent an invitation to the Wisconsin Synod.) By the way, at the recent convention of the Synodical Conference Dr. Behnken acknowledged the fact that said invitation had not been sent to the Wisconsin Synod. (John P. Meyer: 5.)



influence the Missouri Synod. The committee advised that this spirit in Missouri was dangerous for the Synodical Conference and “proper steps should be taken in time to check the danger.”<sup>87</sup>

### **1943 - Wisconsin Synod Convention**

In the following two years, President Brenner got the ball rolling with the “Standing Committee on Union Matter” (as it was now called). Since the last convention the committee was able to meet with Missouri and others members of the Synodical Conference three times. The first time served mostly to establish what the matters were that endangered the unity of spirit. At the following two meetings, papers were submitted on those matters established at the previous meeting. These papers treated the matters on “proof passages pertaining to church fellowship and prayer fellowship with errorists,” “doctrinal questions that would be involved in the ‘framing of document of agreement’” and “on differences between doctrinal questions and question of purely exegetical nature.” All things were agreed upon except matters of prayer fellowship at intersynodical conferences.

At one of the meetings the Committee had with Missouri in 1942, Missouri again offered the invitation to Wisconsin to join in discussions with the ALC. The Committee on behalf of the synod declined. The Committee also records the opinion of the ALC toward Missouri offering this invitation. An ALC writer, Dr. Reu, raised a point concerning Missouri’s invitation. In his article, Reu “intimates rather plainly that the American Lutheran Church, which for reasons of its own had refrained from including these sister synods of Missouri in its invitation to the earlier negotiations, might object to such participation now.” This should have been a red flag to Missouri.<sup>88</sup>

As for the further developments in the negotiations between Missouri and the ALC, the Committee had not received direct information. The information they had to go by was from the *Lutheran Witness* in which the Missouri Committee for Doctrinal Unity reports on its meeting with the ALC Commission. The Committee quoted and observed two concerns from the discussions: 1. “the obstacle” keeping Missouri and the ALC apart was “a different view of the fellowship question or of the subject of unionism.” “*The obstacle*” did not clearly state the

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<sup>87</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings 1941: 77.

<sup>88</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings 1943: 64-65.

matters of doctrine in question. 2. Missouri did not press for more to discuss to draft a single confessional document.<sup>89</sup>

Since there were many questions to be answered concerning these relations, President Brenner wrote a memorial to President Behnken to clear matters up. In this letter, Brenner organized his questions to President Behnken in four categories and gave Wisconsin's reasoning for each: 1. "Are you ready to agree to such an indefinite postponement of the American Lutheran Church's pledge [to discuss a single confessional document]?" The promise Missouri gave to the Synodical Conference to make sure this discussion happen seemed very remote.

2. "Are you ready to accept the implication that the objections raised by the American Lutheran Conference ("that the anti-Missouri feeling was at too high a pitch") are something that you could in good conscience 'help to remove'?" According to Wisconsin, the reason for this "unfavorable attitude" in the American Lutheran Conference was Missouri's insistence on pure doctrine.

3. "Shall we conclude that the discussions of doctrinal differences between you and the American Lutheran Church are a closed chapter, and that you are definitely committed to [your 1938 convention resolutions]?" The doctrinal "obstacle" was not mentioned clearly in the Lutheran Witness article and the reference to "our (Missouri and ALC) *common* doctrinal position" kept on coming up.

4. "In view of the unionistic attitude of the [ALC], which has become increasingly evident, will you not agree that further negotiations for establishing church fellowship could only undermine the testimony that has been previously given, and should therefore be discontinued for the time being?" Missouri seemed to be inconsistent regarding early stages of these intersynodical negotiations when looking at the Chicago Theses of 1928. According to these Theses, Missouri's committee recommended "to desist from intersynodical conferences" because "the opponents have given evidence that they do not hold our position in the doctrine of conversion and election." Looking at that, "further conference would be useless and would only be creating the impression that we are endeavoring to come to an understanding which is not the case." To this early stance of Missouri, Brenner asks, "Does the same conclusion not apply

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid: 65-67.

today?” In sending this letter to President Behnken, the Committee hoped those “frank questions may help to dispel the confusion” and “strengthen the ties of common faith that unite” them.<sup>90</sup>

### **1945 - Wisconsin Synod Convention**

In previous presidential reports, Brenner did not spend much time on business in his opening devotions. However, in 1945 he felt it necessary to address certain issues right away. One of those issues was the decision Missouri made at its 1944 convention. Missouri resolved that it no longer found objectionable items in Scouting. To that issue, Brenner had much to say:

“No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier.” 2 Tim. 2:4.

This word of God formerly meant to us that a pastor and his church as such should devote themselves in a single-minded manner to the ministry of the gospel, carefully refraining from meddling with the affairs of this life, in which the Christian as an individual certainly has part.

Now we hear the opinion expressed that a pastor and a church as such owe something to the public, namely cooperation with others in the building of good citizenship in the community.

This is a question that demands serious study, but some brethren have already anticipated the answer by allying themselves as Lutherans with agencies or organizations outside of our Church. The most disturbing case in point is that of the introduction of Boy Scouting into our Church.

We hold that the Scout program still contains elements of religion; that it perverts the teachings of Holy Scriptures; and that, therefore, the Scriptures bid us to avoid it. According to our firm convictions, the book “Scouting In the Lutheran Church”, which is the product of a joint committee of Lutherans not of one fellowship, is rendering our Lutheran Church an outstanding disservice.

These instances reveal a definite trend of thought and action away from the position we have held until not. Shall we yield to this trend?

We, too, like Saul at Gilgal, have felt the stress of emergencies. We know what power our emotions have over our judgment. There is a strong appeal in the vista of far-reaching planning and world encompassing operation in the work of the Church, and there is a certain force in the reasoning that only a united front and the cooperation of all Lutheran bodies can insure to us the place to which we are entitled and enable us to do our work efficiently. We are fully aware of the fact that “public opinion” is in favor of such concerted action. The Wisconsin Synod church and pastor who refuse to unite with the council in this area will be separated, at least in a measure, from a sister church of the Synodical Conference. As the Council is to deal with Government agencies in the name of all Lutherans, we may meet with some difficulties in serving our men in Government hospitals, etc.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid: 67-70.

<sup>91</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings 1945: 11-12. Brenner went on to say the Lord is in charge of his Church. His will will be done as he rules and builds his Church with his Word. And he will preserve his Church no matter the attacks on it.

The tone is clear in Brenner's words that he was offended and disappointed in Missouri's stance. Brenner wanted pastors to make it clear to their congregations what Missouri's stance on Scouting was and why Wisconsin stood against Scouting. Though Missouri's decision on Scouting was the main offense that was touched upon by Wisconsin synod-wide, it was not the only offensive decision made at Missouri's 1944 convention.

Before Wisconsin met for its 1945 convention, President Brenner received a letter from M. F. Kretzmann, the secretary of the Missouri Synod, in response to President Brenner's letter's recorded in Wisconsin's 1943 convention proceedings. In this letter, Kretzmann cordially promised that the Missouri Synod had recognized their obligation to check with their sister synods before going into agreement with any other Lutheran church body. This would happen once Missouri and the ALC had prepared the requested one doctrinal agreement.<sup>92</sup>

Also before Wisconsin's 1945 convention, the Synodical Conference met in August of 1944. To this convention, President Brenner wrote a strong letter concerning the matter of Lutheran Church Union. Since the last Synodical Conference convention in 1940,<sup>93</sup> committees of the four synods continued to meet together to work on "continuing close cooperation between the different union committees of the Synodical Conference" and Missouri worked on "bringing about the framing of one document of agreement."

Brenner was a little agitated in his letter to the conference. Missouri had yet again not gone along with the "close cooperation" between the synods, which was agreed upon in 1940. They went ahead and drafted the "Doctrinal Affirmation" as the one doctrinal agreement between Missouri and the ALC. Missouri did not once bring it to the synods of the Synodical Conference for discussion and instead placed it before them as an "accomplished fact." Missouri also was asked to refrain from entering into any kind of fellowship with the ALC until matters were clarified. Brenner boldly speaks saying that Missouri has not taken this into account either: "We feel constrained to state at this time that we have been seriously perturbed by numerous instances of an anticipation of a union not yet existing, or, as it has been put, not yet declared." Brenner goes on to list a few examples of such instances where this is the case.<sup>94</sup>

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Brenner also encourages the people to stay firm in God's Word and not to waver. (The rest of Brenner's devotion can be found in Appendix B.)

<sup>92</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings 1945: 72

<sup>93</sup> The Synodical Conference did not meet in convention in 1942 because of World War II. Usually they met every two years.

<sup>94</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings, 1945: 73-74

The Standing Committee in Matters of Church union now reports to the 1945 Wisconsin convention with these two letters before them. Referring to the letter by Kretzmann, the Committee stated their opinion that “this letter does not answer our questions” and it truly did not. The Committee makes note that the “Doctrinal Affirmation” was published jointly by Missouri and the ALC in the fall of 1944 to be the single document of agreement that was requested. This document was sent out to all pastors of the Wisconsin Synod for study. After study of the document, it was noted that it was much better than the ALC’s “Declaration.” However, in certain articles, the “Brief Statement” was “modified substantially both by additions and omissions.” In their initial study of the document, the committee felt that all previous errors have not been excluded and the truth had not been adequately safeguarded. Therefore they urged that “a thorough study and critical appraisal of the ‘Doctrinal Affirmation’ as it compares with the ‘Brief Statement’ by all conferences and constituents of the Synod.” In reference to President Brenner’s letter to the Synodical Conference, the “committee feels constrained to state, that the problem of union has become more difficult because of a number of incidents which anticipate a union which does not yet exist.” Official protests were filed to the Synodical Conference.<sup>95</sup>

Again the Committee presented a letter written by President Brenner to be sent to President Behnken. In the letter, President Brenner voiced the objections of the Synod about the “Doctrinal Affirmation.” Wisconsin had hoped the new document would “restate the doctrines of the Brief Statement, and if necessary, even clarify some of the parts.” However, as they looked closer it really was modified by enough omissions and additions to cause concerns in Wisconsin. Brenner wished that these concerns would be carried along to the Missouri Synod before they come to a final decision in the matter.<sup>96</sup>

Last of all the Committee pointed to President Brenner’s Official Address to the convention where he called to attention that “Cooperation in Externals” is unionistic (The exact words can be found in Appendix B). The Committee recommended that the Synod “recognize the principles set forth in this reports as being scripturally correct” and they referred President Brenner’s letter to the Synodical Conference citing examples of “Cooperation in Externals.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid: 74-75.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid: 76.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid: 77-78/

## 1947 - Wisconsin Synod Convention

As each convention went by, the Committee's report got longer and longer as more important information was necessary to be reported. The Committee's report at Wisconsin's 1947 convention included troubling ALC convention proceedings, a "Friendly Invitation" of the ALC to Wisconsin, and a large discussion on the issue of Scouting.

The Committee reported that the ALC at its 1946 convention "rejected the Doctrinal Affirmation as 'not...generally acceptable,' at the same time declaring that it despaired 'of attaining Lutheran unity by way of additional doctrinal formulations and reformulations.'"<sup>98</sup>

However, the content of the ALC's "Friendly Invitation" troubled the Committee even more. There the ALC resolved to go back to their 1938 resolution which stated "the 'Brief Statement' together with its 'Declaration' to be sufficient doctrinal basis for church fellowship." It also stated that "no intervening discussions have revealed any fundamental doctrinal difference...that forbid(s) entry into pulpit and altar fellowship with the Missouri Synod." It also explained their rejection of the "Doctrinal Affirmation" because it was based on an "allowable and wholesome latitude of theological opinion on the basis of the teachings of the Word of God." It called it a "threat to evangelical liberty of conscience" when someone makes a unified statement of doctrine an absolute condition of fellowship. Finally, it recommended a joint meeting with Missouri in order to figure out "What practical steps can be taken to demonstrate in action, life, and practice the measure of unity which now exists."<sup>99</sup>

The Committee hinted at the point that the "Declaration" was truly a sufficient document to represent the ALC's doctrinal stance. The "Declaration" called for toleration of different opinions in certain doctrines and declared those "not divisive of Church fellowship." This principle obviously referred back to the old "open questions" which the Iowa synod once held. Since 1938 this had been the ALC's doctrinal position. Evidence of that was shown in that fact that the ALC was still a member of the American Lutheran Conference in which there was much doctrinal diversity. The Committee concluded their report by promising the convention that they would send two men to observe the upcoming Missouri convention to see what they would need to recommend next.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings, 1947: 100-101.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid: 101.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid: 102.

These two men sent a supplementary report to share what they observed at Missouri's convention. The men reported that the Missouri Synod was not ready to enter into fellowship with the ALC, but was willing to continue doctrinal discussions. The most important observation was that Missouri went back to the "Brief Statement" for doctrinal discussions until one document be agreed upon.<sup>101</sup>

### **1949 - Wisconsin Synod Convention**

The Committee's report to the 1949 Wisconsin Convention gave further observations that had been discussed with Missouri and the ALC but also included some new things to be discussed. The Scouting issue was addressed further. A new development arose over in Germany about two churches joining together and looking for approval—Breslau Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church. The main focus would be concerning certain incidents where Missourians were involved in unionistic measures.

Brenner's observation from 1944 (there is an "anticipation of a union not yet existing") could clearly be seen within Missouri and the incidents were growing. These growing incidents involved "joint worship and work under conditions which are contrary to Scripture." The Committee was "impressed by the growing frequency and boldness of these incidents" and "unfortunately they often involved members and sometimes official representative and organization." The efforts of the Committee to deal with these situations met with little success. As a result, the Committee "authorized the writing of a series of articles for the 'Northwestern Lutheran,' dealing with the issue of unionism in its several phases." This was done to clarify the situation for the Synod.<sup>102</sup>

Before further actions, the Committee warned against two dangers: "hasty, drastic action on the one hand, and inaction on the other." The committee wished the Synod to follow down the narrow road. Therefore, they wrote a few "frank" questions in which they hoped Missouri would answer at the 1950 convention. With these questions, the Committee hoped the answers would determine what further action to take in future intersynodical relations.<sup>103</sup>

President Brenner forwarded these questions to President Behnken in a letter on behalf of the Wisconsin Synod. Brenner began the letter on a high note:

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid: 112.

<sup>102</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings 1949: 110-111.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid: 111.

Among the many divine blessings which we have enjoyed during our one hundred years of history, and of which we have been reminded frequently at our Centennial Convention in 1949, not the least has been the bond of unity which has welded your Hon. Synod and ours together for more than three-quarters of a century. This unity is precious to us, and it is purely for the sake of preserving it that we venture to address you at this time.<sup>104</sup>

In the letter, Brenner explained they have battled the “rising tide of unionism” in the recent years. In their action, the Wisconsin Synod has stood with Missouri on Article 18, On Church Fellowship, of “Brief Statement” and especially the last phrase: “We repudiate unionism, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God’s command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9, 10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely.” Brenner clearly stated the purpose for this letter:

In our efforts we have, however, been handicapped by the fact that members and sometimes official representatives and organizations of your Synod have been involved in what seem to be obvious violations of these principles. Efforts to remedy this situation by dealing with the individuals involved have met with little or no success. Official discussions in an Intersynodical Forum have been equally futile. On the other hand, the positive testimony that we have tried to give has been to a considerable extent neutralized by the silence of your Synod. The inevitable result has been serious confusion and offense.<sup>105</sup>

Brenner then addressed President Behnken with six questions to clear up the confusion that had been caused:

1. Does the Missouri Synod approve of the participation of its pastors in the programs and in the joint worship of intersynodical laymen’s organizations, specifically Lutheran Men in America? If not, only a public disavowal of the offense will remove it.
2. Does the Missouri Synod approve of the cooperation of some of its welfare agencies with Lutherans with whom it is otherwise not in fellowship, in view of the fact that such welfare work is inseparably associated with spiritual implications? If the Synod does not approve, what will you do to clear yourselves of the responsibility for the offense that has been given?
3. Does the Missouri Synod approve the cooperation of its representatives with the National Lutheran Council in matters which are admittedly no longer in the field of externals? (e.g., “Building a New Lutheranism in Great Britain,” “Lutheran Witness,” 3-8-49, p. 76). If not, what will be done to correct the impression that has been given?
4. Does the Missouri Synod approve the position taken by its representatives at the First Bad Boll with regard to the program for devotions and worship? If not, what will be done to remove the offense?
5. Does the Missouri Synod approve of the arrangement whereby prominent members of its official committees are serving with representatives of other Lutheran bodies as sponsors of the book “Scouting in the Lutheran Church,” published by the National Scout Organization? If not, what will you do about the offense that was thus given?

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid: 112.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid: 112.



6. Does the Missouri Synod still hold to its former position that Rom. 16:17 applies to all errorists, whether Lutheran or not? (See Stoeckhardt, Römerbrief, pp. 641 and 642; also Pieper, Dogmatik III, p. 474, Sec. 5; Brief Statement, Art. 28.) If so, what will be done to correct the growing impression that this is no longer the case?

Brenner forwarded the Synod's opinion that it was their "earnest hope and prayer" that answers to these questions would show them to be "in full agreement on these issues" and "result in a strengthening of the ties which unite" them.

One thing that caused this confusion and distress was a resolution of Missouri's Council of Presidents a few months before. This resolution expressed "profound distress over Lutheran disunity" and declared "its willingness and desire to co-operate in efforts to achieve Lutheran unity in doctrine and its application to the life and work of the church." It proposed that "all Lutheran bodies in America join in free conferences" in order "to establish existing agreement and to remove differences for the purpose of bringing about unity of Christian faith and fellowship." It hoped that the discussion at these conferences would result in "the eventual formation of a federation of Lutheran bodies" working together "on the basis of God's Word. It resolved "to promote Lutheran unity" in various districts of the Missouri Synod so that others will agree and eventually work also to achieve this goal. The resolution finally asked Missouri's President "to form a national inter-Lutheran committee for the purpose of arranging the proposed free conferences."<sup>106</sup> This resolution showed a clear unionistic spirit of the Missouri Synod. Though this is the ultimate wish of every Lutheran, if not every Christian, that all might be united in one faith—realistically it is not possible.

On June 10, 1949, Brenner replied to a letter President Behnken had written him a month earlier. This letter was only referenced in the convention proceedings as a "further document" under the committee's report about this resolution. The letter's message was not included, but for the sack of this paper, it will be quoted in its entirety here. Note the very blunt nature of Brenner's words as sound doctrine was at stake:

If you had informed us of your plan before proposing it to the presidents of Lutheran bodies not in fellowship with the Synodical Conference and giving it wide publicity, we would not again be finding ourselves in the unenviable position of facing an accomplished fact which leaves us no choice but that of either following you unquestioningly into a situation which we consider precarious or of expressing our dissent by word and deed, and so bringing down on our Synod anew the condemnation of the fervid advocates of a Lutheran Church union.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid: 114.

But, you have asked for our reaction, and I will try to state it briefly:

The motivation offered in the preamble to the resolutions of your presidents and supported by remarks in your letter does not convince us that there is a compelling need of an all-out effort to bring all Lutheran bodies together and that we are divinely called to support such a movement. In fact, we cannot escape the impression that there is in it at least a faint suggestion of planning for defense that goes beyond our duty of witnessing the truth single mindedly as we are commissioned to do.

As we declared in 1939, we are willing to meet for a discussion of doctrine and practice the representatives of any church body desiring such a conference, providing that it frankly admits that differences exist, and insists that they must be removed before we can enter into fellowship with each other. Conflicting resolutions and public statements would, naturally, have to be written, or in the latter case, disavowed officially. A general 'free conference' would, therefore, appear to be out of question.

We do not believe that the present conditions can be compared to those 'of the late '50ues of the last century' [1855, etc.]. The differences have been set forth very clearly, and congregations have rallied around the banner of the synod that stands for their convictions, making themselves responsible for the doctrine and practice taught, or tolerated, in it. If they find something wrong within their household, their duty is, and this is Scripture, that of brotherly admonition, and not '*die Flucht in dier Oeffentlichkeit.*' Negotiations between the synods should be carried on by representatives who are duly chosen for this work.

Hence we find 'local conferences,' particularly when also laymen are to be invited, ill-advised. The men who attend to their own initiative represent their synod in fact, though, perhaps, not in theory and I, for one, want to have a voice in the choice of the men who are to speak for me. The activities of self-appointed men do not unite the Church, but will divide it eventually. They offer occasion for propoganda and for the formation of pressure groups that do not serve the interests of the truth.

For the reasons stated above, and for further reasons, we are not ready to consent to the creation of 'a national inter-Lutheran committee for the purpose of arranging and proposing free conferences of Lutheran pastors and laymen.'

And now, to be perfectly frank, for what are we going to stand if we should consent to attend the proposed 'free conferences'? There was a time when the line of demarcation between the Synodical Conference and the other Lutheran bodies was so sharp and clear that it would not be necessary to ask this question. But it has been blurred and, in instances, almost obliterated, by the statements and acts of individual men and of groups in your Synod, statements and actions against which we have been raising our voices all these years, and we have not been able to remove even one of the issues that have arisen between us. Shall we discuss them in the presence of men from other Lutheran bodies?

It is an open secret that there is a sharp division in your Synod. Conservatives and 'progressives' are voicing their convictions publicly, and the latter are by their actions encouraging movements which we consider detrimental and dangerous to the Church.

Can we under these conditions have the courage to believe that we are called, and in a position, to correct and direct other Lutheran bodies? We are of the firm conviction that it is our first duty, and this is a holy duty, to set our own house in order, and that in doing this in the true spirit of the Gospel we are making the most effective contribution toward the unity of the Lutheran Church in our land and in other countries.

But we want to hear you before we make a final decision. The Committee on Intersynodical Relations has been created by the Synodical Conference for this very purpose, and it is more readily available than any other group would be. But I will be glad to consider any suggestion which you may wish to make.<sup>107</sup>

The Floor Committee on Church Union at Wisconsin's convention responded to this resolution by Missouri Synod. First, the Committee moved that the Synod agree with President Brenner's reply to President Behnken in which he stated that they were "not ready to consent to the creation of a 'national inter-Lutheran committee,'" and that the Synod reiterate its 1939 declaration that "we are willing to meet for a discussion of doctrine and practice the representatives of any church body desiring such conference, providing that it frankly admits that differences exist and insists that they must be removed before we can enter into fellowship with each other."<sup>108</sup>

The Floor Committee also wanted to emphasize certain points in President Brenner's reply to President Behnken. First, Brenner was not convinced that at that time there was "a compelling need of an all-out effort to bring all the Lutheran bodies together" nor were they "divinely called to support such a movement." Second, Brenner noted that "negotiations between synods should be carried on by representatives" who were "chosen for this work and that the proposed local free conferences" were "ill-advised, since all too frequently the activities of self-appointed men" did not "unite the church," but would "divide it eventually." These conferences offered "occasion for propaganda and for the formation of pressure groups that do not serve the interests of the truth." Third, since the Synodical Conference was being torn apart by certain matters of doctrine and practice, Brenner stated that it was their "first duty... a holy duty," to set their own "house in order, and that in doing this in the true Spirit of the Gospel" they were "making the most effective contribution toward the unity of the Lutheran church" in the United State and other nations. Fourth, Brenner expressed his great frustration that Missouri went ahead again before discussing with the Synodical Conference. The way the proposal had come placed Brenner and the Synod "in the unenviable position of facing an accomplished fact" which left the Synod "no choice but of either following [the Missouri Synod] unquestioningly into a situation" which Brenner considered "precarious," or the Synod would have to express their disagreement "by word and deed," and in doing so would bring down on the Wisconsin

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<sup>107</sup> John W.O. Brenner papers, file 97, WELS archives, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library, Mequon, Wis.

<sup>108</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings 1949: 115.

Synod “the condemnation of the fervid advocates of a Lutheran church union.” Brenner could not have stated it much better in reply to these sudden resolutions of the Missouri Synod.<sup>109</sup>

The Floor Committee at the end of its report made an important recommendation and motion. They recommended that the Standing Committee on Church Union “continue, whenever it may deem it advisable, to inform and instruct all the members of the Synod in these matter by means of articles” in church papers. The Floor Committee saw the importance in keeping the Synod’s clergy and laity well-informed in these matters. (Six years later in 1955, the ill-informed clergy and laity may have been a factor in the slowness of Wisconsin’s action to break with the Missouri Synod.) The Floor Committee noted the ties which brought Missouri and Wisconsin together were being loosened. Therefore they moved that “a letter be addressed to the Synod of Missouri.<sup>110</sup>

### **1951 – Wisconsin Synod Convention**

Since Wisconsin met last in convention in 1949, a couple important matters happened in the immediate Lutheran context. Missouri and the ALC drafted a new document, the “Common Confession,” as a new document for fellowship discussions. At their 1950 convention, Missouri adopted the “Common Confession” and President Behnken drafted a polite reply rejecting Wisconsin’s six questions that Missouri was guilty of violations.

Brenner made note of these matters in his president’s report and declared that these would be important tasks to discuss in that convention. First, the convention needed to study the “Common Confession” adopted by Missouri and the ALC because they submitted it to Wisconsin for approval. Second, the Standing Committee would take a closer look at President Behnken’s reply to Wisconsin’s six questions. Brenner stated that the Committee on Church Union would cover it all and that he had “nothing to add to it.” However, Brenner very clearly expressed his attitude and advice, which is shared with much of Wisconsin Synod, in the matter with Missouri:

It will become evident that we have dealt patiently with our sister synod. Since 1939 we have met many times with the various groups that represented it and have practiced Christian admonition. In this we have consistently followed the orderly course and refrained from any agitation that is contrary to brotherly love. It would be well for all the members of our Synod

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid: 115-116.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid: 116-118.

to content themselves with acting only through our committee, which will always be glad to give a brother a hearing.<sup>111</sup>

Before Wisconsin's convention, President Behnken sent a few documents to President Brenner. In one letter to the Wisconsin Synod, he politely denied any violations that Wisconsin had accused them of. He basically told Wisconsin, "There is nothing wrong in Missouri." In his conclusion he did however admit that the only things wrong were because of the occasional sinful actions of human beings: "Of course, we realize that violations may occur due to the infirmity that still cleaves to the individual as well as to a church body." Behnken politely thanked the Wisconsin Synod for its concern and wished that "differences of opinion" on both sides would be settled so that they could continue to work together in unity. President Brenner received two more documents from President Behnken, a copy of the "Common Confession" and Missouri's minutes concerning resolutions to the "Common Confession."

At once Brenner called for the Standing Committee to meet and review the "Common Confession" for the Wisconsin's 1951 convention. There were three specific articles in the "Common Confession" which especially concerned the committee: Justification, Conversion, and Election. Faith plays an important part in these doctrines. Therefore they looked at these first. After further study, these three articles were rejected for the following reasons. Article VI on Justification admitted "of false answers to the question concerning the function of faith in justification." Article VII on Conversion left "room for the error that man's conversion is at least in part conditioned upon his own attitude or preparation." This was precisely the issue in controversy with the ALC. Therefore this article did not do its purpose to clear up the issues between Missouri and the ALC. Article IV on Election failed to clearly place faith in its proper place in God's act of election.<sup>112</sup> The Standing Committee concluded its review of the "Common Confession":

In the foregoing we have referred to a number of serious omissions in the article dealing with the doctrines that have been in controversy. In addition to these, we find ourselves constrained to state that in a confessions drawn up for the purpose of establishing fellowship between the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church also the doctrine of the Sunday would need to be included, since up to recent date it has been in controversy between these church bodies.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings, 1951: 16

<sup>112</sup> Ibid: 129-131.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid: 135.

Therefore, the Committee did not have a problem with what the “Common Confession” stated, but what it *did not* state.

After bringing this review of the “Common Confession,” the Standing Committee brought their report to the convention floor concerning the three issues: President Behnken’s letter, scouting, and the “Common Confession.” First, toward President Behnken’s letter in answer to the six questions, the Standing Committee was clearly disappointed and frustrated. The Committee looked at the answer to each question very closely and none of the answers satisfied them. Concluding their review of the questions the Committee expressed:

Your committee keenly regrets that it has to take issue with the reasoning and the statements of the Venerable President of the Missouri Synod. But we hold that this difficult situation was created by the judgment of a convention which delegated to its Praesidium the answering of questions in which the actions or decisions of its President were so largely involved.<sup>114</sup>

The committee was unsatisfied with the leadership of President Behnken and believed that he was not getting his house in order, but allowed matters to slip by<sup>115</sup>.

Second, toward the issue of Scouting, the Standing Committee was not pleased with President Behnken’s reply and declared it as “unbrotherly” because of what was originally addressed to the Synodical Conference. Therefore, the committee thought it best to leave it up to the Intersynodical Committee at the next Synodical Conference convention.

Third, toward the “Common Confessions,” the Standing Committee was also not pleased, but frustrated. The committee expressed this frustration that Missouri went ahead in further negotiations with the ALC, even though Wisconsin had asked Missouri to refrain. Wisconsin’s previous reason for asking Missouri was because further negotiations would “involve a denial of the truth, and would cause confusion and disturbance in the Church.” Missouri, however, never truly went along with this request, but evidence shows they did just the opposite.

When the “Common Confession” was brought before the committee, it was anticipated that the document would be what it said it would be—“a settlement of the controversies over

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid: 140-141.

<sup>115</sup> Many pastors had observations of President Behnken. John F. Brenner once stated that for Missourians “when Behnken walked into the room, it was like God walked into the room.” Another pastor compared President Behnken attitude and leadership to President Brenner: “Behnken always thought he could trust his professors at the seminary, but he was hoodwinked. They pulled the wool over his eyes. That is where Behnken failed his synod, because he didn’t provide. He himself was straight as a person, but he was not firm. Brenner could see through things—he could analyze things. He could understand what things meant or what certain actions resulted in. Behnken, if people said nice things, he didn’t recognize where they went wrong. In dealing with the Statement of the 44, he didn’t realize what was happening. He was ‘always cordial.’ He was always a gentleman and didn’t like to ruffle feathers. ...In the end he maybe realized what had happened.”

which the respective church bodies [had] been divided in the past.” The Committee noted that, if anything, this document should have been “stronger than Missouri union resolutions of 1938, both in its positive statement of doctrine and also in the specific rejection of error.” However, this positive anticipation was quickly dispersed. Even after discussions with Missouri members, the Standing Committee unfortunately reported the findings from their study that the “Common Confession” involved “an actual denial of the truth,” because it claimed “to be a settlement of doctrinal differences which [were] not settled in fact.”<sup>116</sup>

The Standing Committee concluded their report to the convention:

Your committee has tried to confine this report to a sober presentation and careful evaluation of the facts before us. It believes that the recommendations for specific resolutions should come from the Floor Committee, and only after careful and critical study for our findings. We also believe, however, that there are certain basic steps which must be taken if we are to remain loyal to the Word of God and our own convictions based thereon.<sup>117</sup>

As the Standing Committee advised, the Floor Committee now made its recommendations for further action. First, to the Standing Committee’s report of President Behnken’s letter, the Floor Committee moved that “with all the firmness of true love for a brother again ask that, for the sake of an effectual removal of the public offense, . . . public disavowal be made. And if such public disavowal is not made by the Missouri Synod, the matter should be carried to the Synodical Conference.” Second, to the scouting issue, the Floor Committee insisted that the report of the new committee dealing with it be heard and acted upon at the next Synodical Conference Convention (which would be 1952). Third, to the “Common Confession,” the Floor Committee resolved to make the Standing Committee’s review their own, to inform the Missouri Synod that the “Common Confession” was not only inadequate, but also involved “an untruth” and created “a basically untruthful situation” because the action had been “officially interpreted as a settlement of past differences” which were not settled, and to ask the Missouri Synod to reject that the “Common Confession” was indeed “settlement of the doctrines treated by the two committees (Missouri and ALC).” The Floor Committee further resolved to direct the Missouri Synod to the ALC’s new position challenging “the clarity and therefore the authority of the Scriptures,” and that the ALC must first recognize this as an obstacle to be removed before any agreement can be made. Finally, the Floor Committee resolved that President Brenner be the one to inform President Behnken of the action Wisconsin has taken and

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid: 143-144.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid: 144.

that both reports of the Standing Committee and Floor Committee be given to President Behnken and the President of the Synodical Conference. When these reports were given after much time spent studying them, “the Convention *unanimously*<sup>118</sup> adopted the various points of the report and finally the report in its entirety.”<sup>119</sup>

## 1952 – Synodical Conference Convention

At this time, there must be a special note of the events that took place at the 1952 Synodical Conference—a conference that could be labeled as “the first smoking gun” before the impasse declared in 1960. It was after this convention that Wisconsin announced<sup>120</sup> itself to be *in statu confessionis*<sup>121</sup> with the Missouri. The events at this convention truly brought the spirit of Missouri into perspective for Wisconsin.

A pastor (who wishes to remain anonymous) that attended this convention described the atmosphere that so encompassed it. “It was like some kind of football game going on...cheering and booing.” There was a lot of emotion to be had there. When there was something said that Missouri liked, Missouri men cheered. However, when they heard something they did not like, they outwardly booed. Missouri<sup>122</sup> was viewed as being stubborn and hard-hearted at this convention.

It was in this atmosphere that President Brenner got up to speak. At Wisconsin’s previous convention in 1951, the delegates moved to bring their objections to the Synodical Conference if the Missouri Synod would not make a public disavowal and offences. Such was the case, and now President Brenner spoke on behalf of the Standing Committee and the Wisconsin Synod. First, Brenner brought to the floor Wisconsin’s stance concerning the “Common Confession”:

*We therefore submit that by the adoption of the Common Confession the Missouri Synod has compromised the Scriptural and historical doctrinal position of the Synodical Conference*

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<sup>118</sup> Emphasis included in the original proceedings.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid: 147-148.

<sup>120</sup> Wisconsin delegates only *announced* this, but they had to wait until Wisconsin’s 1953 Convention to declare it.

<sup>121</sup> An *in statu confessionis* declaration is a declaration that a group is in a state of protesting fellowship, the final step before declaring a break in fellowship.

<sup>122</sup> The Synods at the Synodical Conference were represented by their respective sizes. So Missouri highly outnumbered the Wisconsin, ELS, and Slovak Synod representatives—making up more than half of the representatives (Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1952, p. 3-5). This statistic needs to be taken into account, because it was obvious that Missouri directed the atmosphere and voting of the convention.



for the reasons thus indicated in the resolutions of the 1951 convention of the Wisconsin Synod...

We *therefore* urge the Synodical Conference in convention assembled to request the Missouri Synod to repeal the *Common Confession* and to return to the clarity and decisiveness in setting forth the Scriptural and historical doctrinal position of the Synodical Conference for which the *Brief Statement* sets an excellent precedent.<sup>123</sup>

Second Brenner spoke in general about the many issues of Missouri's fellowship principles:

The unity in the Synodical Conference has also be disturbed by deviation within the Missouri Synod from the Scriptural practice on which our fellowship in the Synodical Conference has been based—a matter in which we have appealed directly to the Missouri Synod without achieving the required results. ...

We *therefore* request the Synodical Conference in convention assembled to appeal to the Missouri Synod to conform to the position in regard to practice as it is set forth in the *Brief Statement* and in the 1950 resolutions of the Synodical Conference.<sup>124</sup>

At this the booing began by the Missouri Synod because it was not something they wanted to hear. By this time, they were fed up with Wisconsin always rejecting what they were trying to accomplish. To many Missouri members, the Wisconsin Synod had become Missouri's ball and chain. The same pastor that attended this convention reacted to Missouri's attitude with "disgust." He said "It was a low point of what kind of relationship we can have when they react that way to our concerns. It was lousy." This was the same reaction of many Wisconsin and Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) members.

After the conference, Wisconsin unofficially declared *in statio confessionis* with the Missouri. In a Northwestern Lutheran article, Professor Reim described how Brenner handled the situation after the convention:

When at the close the convention President Brenner called for a meeting of our Wisconsin delegation, many felt that this might herald the dissolution of the Synodical Conference, in spite of his express statement that this action did not constitute a "walkout." But the purpose of that meeting was not to formulate an announcement of drastic action, of sudden severance, but a quiet, carefully considered statement on the part of those present, to the effect that they now declare themselves to be *in statu confessionis*—in a state of confession—over against our sister synod of Missouri.<sup>125</sup>

Reim went on to explain what *in statu confessionis* meant for this specific situation and why they chose to take such action:

We have made it clear in the foregoing that a confession was being presented throughout the days of the convention by the steadfast testimony that was there being brought to the Truth—

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<sup>123</sup> Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1952: 157.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid: 158.

<sup>125</sup> Edmund Reim, "As We See It: A State of Confession" Northwestern Lutheran 39 (September 7, 1952):282.

even though it was not being received. Since our delegation was on the one hand determined not make a decision that must be reserved for our Synod alone, but on the other equally determined that this testimony be upheld in spite of the opposition that had been encountered, such a formal declaration was imperative. Lest our continued membership in the Synodical Conference be constructed as a surrender of our convictions, it is necessary that no one be left in doubt.<sup>126</sup>

When asked if it was because of the “new spirit” in Missouri that Wisconsin did this, this same pastor answered, “No, not just the spirit, but the rejection of WELS attempts to voice their concern. They were not willing to take up the matters.” At this point, the Missouri Synod was not considered as “persisting errorists,” but in a sense they were on “probation.”

Wisconsin, on a synod-wide level, had followed the steps of Matthew 18 in admonishing a brother. They had gone directly to the Missouri Synod with their concerns. When they would not listen, they brought Missouri to two or three as witnesses—which in this case were the other members of the Synodical Conference, the ELS and Slovak Synod. When Missouri showed evidence that they would not even listen then, there was no high authority to bring them too such as the church. Therefore, at its 1953 convention, Wisconsin officially declared *in statio confessionis* with the Missouri<sup>127</sup>.

### **1953 – Wisconsin Synod Convention**

This convention was the last convention President Brenner served as president of the Synod and chairman of the Standing Committee. Up to this point, Brenner had served as an influential leader and spokesman for the Wisconsin Synod to the Missouri Synod. It seemed like an unfortunate time to resign as president given the events going on with the Missouri Synod and

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid: 282.

<sup>127</sup> The exact protest as quoted in the footnote of Wisconsin’s 1953 proceedings: “Since it is God’s will that the trumpet do not “give an uncertain sound” (1 Cor. 14,8), and since a faith that is not ready to confess in clear and unmistakable terms “creates a basically untruthful situation” (“A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump,” Gal. 5, 9)–

We, therefore, declare, in order to guard our won faith and to remain true to our God, that, through we do not at this time disavow our fellowship with the Missouri Synod in the Synodical Conference, yet, because the confessional basis on which the synods of the Synodical Conference have jointly stood so far has been seriously impaired by the Common Confessions, we continue to uphold our protest and to declare that the Missouri Synod by retaining the Common Confession and using it for further steps toward union with the ALC is disrupting the Synodical Conference (see Constitution, Art. 5). Thus while we await a decision by our Synod in this grave situation we continue our present relationship with the Missouri Synod only in the hope that it may still come to see the error of its way.

Hence we find ourselves in a STATE OF CONFESSION (theologically expressed, IN STATU CONFESSIONIS).

We hope and pray that the truth may prevail and that God in His grace may avert the threatening disruption of the Synodical Conference.”

having just experienced the Synodical Conference's 1952 convention, but this was Brenner's decision. At the beginning of the convention, a recommendation was adopted that Brenner would serve as president for the entire convention because he had "all of the necessary records and correspondence at his disposal," and "that the newly elected president would be unprepared to assume the direction of the Synod during its Convention."<sup>128</sup>

President Brenner ended his report at the 1953 convention with some interesting statements: "With this report I desire to end my service as the president of the synod, though this may appear to be an inopportune time to do this. I am sure that the Synod will be better served and will be more satisfied if the duties of my office would rest on younger and stronger shoulders."<sup>129</sup>

Was the reason President Brenner resigned because he felt some opposition towards his leadership in the Wisconsin Synod? It is a likely possibility. However, where did this opposition come from and what was the reason for it? At first one might think he was being opposed because of his leadership in dealing with Missouri. This was not necessarily the case, because the Synod backed Brenner in this area. The same pastor interviewed for this thesis described the possible reason and from where Brenner was being opposed:

There were other things involved [than with Missouri]. Michigan. At that time, they, Edgar Hoenecke wanted to form missions. [President Brenner] was very cautious about our synod's financial situation. He came in 1933 right during the depression and when we couldn't do anything we couldn't even start any missions. We weren't opening any new missions or anything like that. We had a 600,000 debt and at that time it was big when you think about the value of money then and during the depression. He's the one who was president when we had to work on that. That was in 1933 and it was 1938-39 when things started happening in Missouri, but at that time we were still solid with Missouri. So he had to go through all of that. And as for starting any new foreign work, almost impossible in his thinking even when we came out of the debt. There was some feeling among some people regarding his leadership in that area and some thought "We got to get rid of him."— Michigan felt. I don't know if he sensed that or not, but I think he sensed some opposition to his leadership. This is just a interjection. He may have felt opposition, not necessarily in the fellowship matter, but as a leader of the synod. He maybe felt that he didn't have the backing of the synod.

Nevertheless, Brenner continued to serve in the role of president of the Synod and chairman of the Standing Committee for current convention.

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<sup>128</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings, 1953: 8.

<sup>129</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings, 1953: 11

In light of the events that happened at the 1952 Synodical Convention, the Standing Committee brought its report to the floor of Wisconsin's 1953 convention. The Committee reported that the Synodical Conference voted to "postpone" many of the issues at hand—one example concerned Part II of the "Common Confession." Because of this delayed action, the Committee stated that this decision to postpone key issues "nullified the work of that Floor Committee, but also effectively defeated the very purpose for which the Synodical Conference was founded, namely to be a forum where matters of doctrine and practice could be discussed between the constituent synod." Therefore they "found themselves constrained to register their solemn protest." There was too much "un-finished business." The Committee decided that it was necessary to send another letter to President Behnken at their next convention in June of 1953.

In this letter, it almost seemed like Wisconsin's final plea to get Missouri to change. This was Brenner's last official letter sent out as president. There is such a great concern and persuasive language in the letter that it is necessary to record it here:

The very fact that in the Synodical Conference we have these many years enjoyed the blessings and comforts of a full unity in doctrine and practice compels the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States to tell you frankly that it is our firm conviction that your body for a number of years has been deviating to an ever increasing extent from the position we have so long held and defended together and thereby has most seriously disturbed our God-created relation and has placed our two synods on opposite sides on a number of important issues, making it impossible for us to join you in the new course you have taken.

Our synod made an earnest effort to prevail on the convention of the Synodical Conference to settle our controversies according to the Scriptures, but, as you know, without avail.

Our synod is, therefore, addressing itself to your convention of 1953, earnestly pleading with you to remove the offenses of which we have for years complained to the Committee on Intersynodical Relations, to the Synodical Conference, and to your convention as well, as so to restore mutual confidence and truly brotherly cooperation.

That we are not misinterpreting your resolutions and actions during the past years is attested by utterances heard from other Lutherans, by some leaders in your synod, and by the protests of dissenting individuals and groups of your brethren, as well as by the fact that some have actually renounced membership in the Missouri Synod for "the sake of conscience."<sup>130</sup>

Brenner went on to plead with Missouri to do the following demands in order to make it possible for them to continue their affiliation and joint labors with them. First, Brenner pleaded that they

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<sup>130</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings 1953: 96. In 1951 Professor Paul Kretzmann of St. Louis Seminary withdrew from Missouri along with a few others and formed the Orthodox Lutheran Conference.

rescind two resolutions: 1. “the “Common Confession” shows that agreement has been achieved in the doctrines treated by the two committees.” 2. “if the [ALC], in convention assembled, accepts it, the “Common Confession” shall be recognized as a statement of agreement on these doctrines between [Missouri] and the [ALC].” Second, Brenner pleaded that Missouri “suspend the doctrinal discussions with the [ALC] until that body in convention clearly and unequivocally has declared itself against Unionism as defined in the “Brief Statement” and has begun to put this principle into practice.” Third, Brenner pleaded that Missouri reverse their resolutions on “Scouting” and re-access their position on “Joint Prayer” and the answers to the question Wisconsin asked in 1949. Brenner concludes his letter:

We hope that you will find it possible to discuss these issues on the floor of the convention, and that all of your delegates will learn all of the facts. May the gracious Lord guide you and give you the spiritual strength to do His will.

We are requesting this action on your part only because we are seeking the restoration of our previous relationship on the basis of the position we once held jointly, and from which we find ourselves unable to depart.

If we are invited to do so, we will be glad to send a delegation of our Committee on Church Union to expatiate on the matters which we have set down briefly.

Praying for peace and brotherly understanding and for true unity in the Synodical Conference.<sup>131</sup>

Two appointed men, Professors C. Lawrenz and E. Reim, attended Missouri’s 1953 Houston convention where President Brenner’s letter was read and discussed. At this convention, the committee stated in reference to the letter, “In general it may be said that our several requests were courteously but definitely declined.” Overall Missouri confirmed their previous positions in “joint prayer” and scouting. Missouri resolved that Part I and Part II of the “Common Confession” be received as one document. In their relations with the ALC, they resolved stating: “Progress toward unity of doctrine has been achieved through discussion on the basis of the Word of God by representatives of the [ALC] and [Missouri Synod].” Therefore it was further resolved that Missouri officials should continue their discussions with representatives of the ALC.

On the basis of this report, the Standing Committee was “constrained to present the following”:

We hold that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

1) by its “deviating to an ever increasing extent from the position we have so long held and defended together,” and “from which we find ourselves unable to depart”; and

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<sup>131</sup> Wisconsin Proceedings, 1953: 96-97.

2) by its failure to heed our admonition in some of the matters (Scouting, Joint Prayer, Suspension of Negotiations); and  
3) by declining early action on our objections to the Common Confession as a settlement of the controversies in the doctrines treated therein,  
has disrupted the Synodical Conference and made it impossible for us to continue our affiliation with the Missouri Synod and our joint labors in the service of the Lord.

The committee then asked the Floor Committee to take its time in studying these findings so they may present “appropriate recommendation and resolutions” to the convention.<sup>132</sup>

The Floor Committee brought its finding to the convention. They first of all acknowledged on account the end of the Standing Committee’s report that the Standing Committee’s “earnest labors over the years [had] failed of their purpose to keep that unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace that once characterized [Wisconsin’s] union in the Synodical Conference.”

The Floor Committee expressed its sadness over the situation and then reflected on the history the two synods have had together. They expressed the joys and accomplishments of the blessed partnership early on. However, they then went into detail about how Missouri had fallen over the years from their strong anti-unionism stance. Looking at these details to that present time, they concluded that the issue was indeed “unionism” for all of the controversies.

Since Missouri had abandoned its former position and turned to these unionistic practices, the Floor Committee made the following recommendations. First, because of these unionistic practices and their reacceptance of the “Common Confession” as a settlement of past differences, the Missouri Synod itself “has brought about [that] break in relations” that was then threatening the existence of the Synodical Conference.” Second, they recommended that the Synod make this declaration known to the Presidents of both Missouri and the Synodical Conference. Third, they approved the Protest that was agreed upon by those Wisconsin representatives immediately following the 1952 Synodical Conference convention. Fourth, they recommended that the President of the Synodical Conference figure out a way to devote all sessions of the 1954 conference to the doctrinal issues involved. Fifth, they recommended that all congregation of the Synod be thoroughly “instructed regarding the issues and the doctrines involved.” Sixth, they recommended that while waiting for a response from President Behnken at the next Synodical Convention, they remain in a state of confession.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid: 99-102.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid: 104-105.

In a substitute proposal, Professor Winfred Schaller recommended that Wisconsin should break with Missouri because of its unscriptural position in the matter of Scouting, prayer-fellowship, chaplaincies, and the “Common Confession” and because Wisconsin’s attempts to correct had failed. He also recommended that they “make every effort to liquidate [their] joint work in a decent and orderly manner and that this matter be directed to the District Presidents in a special session that fall.”<sup>134</sup> There were motions to accept all the committee’s reports and all motions were adopted. With the end of this convention, Brenner stepped down from the presidency and as chairman to the influential Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union.

### III. JOHN W. O. BRENNER AFTER PRESIDENCY

#### **Church of the Lutheran Confessions (CLC) breaks with Wisconsin**

After Wisconsin’s 1953 convention, it seemed that Wisconsin was ready to break with Missouri at their next synod convention. However, as history tells, Wisconsin did not break until eight years later. Why was it the case that Wisconsin did not break sooner? The delay in breaking caused offense to some in the Wisconsin Synod. So in 1957 when Wisconsin failed to break, some pastors split off from Wisconsin and eventually formed the Church of the Lutheran Confessions (CLC). Their reasoning for breaking with Wisconsin was because they thought Wisconsin was in error for not breaking with the Missouri Synod, so they were acting upon their conscience.<sup>135</sup>

A question has been brought up or hinted at by various people, “If President Brenner would have stayed in office another couple of years would the CLC have broken off from Wisconsin?”<sup>136</sup> When President Brenner stepped down and President Naumann was voted into office, many people believed there was a change in mood. “There was sternness in the make-up of President Brenner which was not as obvious in the personality of President Naumann. The

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid: 105-106.

<sup>135</sup> The CLC’s break with Wisconsin is more complicated than this statement, but this is a good enough summary for this paper.

<sup>136</sup> With CLC discussions in the near future, ELS Seminary President, Gaylin Schmeling, brought this specific question up during early discussions about this paper. (October 29, 2014).

evangelical spirit and pastoral concern Naumann typified could be misconstrued by some as softness, while Brenner's sternness could be exaggerated by those with a legalistic bent."<sup>137</sup>

In a review of Mark Braun's book, *A Tale of Two Synods*, a CLC pastor, John K. Pfeiffer, possibly hinted at a certain change in leadership of Wisconsin. Pfeiffer believes that Naumann set the stage for Wisconsin to separate "marking" the false teacher and "avoiding" the false teacher.<sup>138</sup> Could Pfeiffer be implying that this change could not have happened under Brenner? That is a possibility. From the CLC's perspective, Wisconsin was in error if they did not break with Missouri in 1955 even though they saw Naumann as the one changing the distinction between "marking" and "avoiding." Wisconsin would say they were not in error, but were patiently admonishing a brother until there was an impasse in doctrine (which happened in 1960). So would the CLC have broken off if Brenner was still president? Pfeiffer perhaps hints that the CLC would still have broken because changes were not being made under Brenner. However, there is much speculation to answer this question.

There were many factors that should be considered when attempting to answer this question. First of all, Brenner was 79 when he stepped down from the presidency and asked not to be reelected. He made the decision for the reason as quoted earlier, "I am sure that the Synod will be better served and will be more satisfied if the duties of my office would rest on younger and stronger shoulders." Second, Brenner really laid the ground work for Oscar Naumann to take over as president and chairman of the Standing Committee. Though their personalities differed—Brenner being more straight forward and Naumann being more reserved—nothing changed in Wisconsin's stance. When asked if President Naumann was softer than President Brenner in this matter, a pastor answered, "I don't think that there was any change in our position as if [Naumann] was willing to compromise. Reim was replaced by Lawrence. Naumann and Lawrence worked together like Brenner and Reim did." President Naumann did many great things for the Wisconsin Synod and should never be blamed for the CLC breaking off. Third, the Wisconsin Synod was not truly ready to break in 1955. A pastor once put it this way when asked the question:

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<sup>137</sup> Braun, "He was a man and a Christian": The Life and Work of John W.O. Brenner" *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, 27:2 (October 2009): 28

<sup>138</sup> John K. Pfeiffer. "BOOK REVIEW: A Tale of Two Synods by Mark Braun." *Journal of Theology*. 44:1 (March 2004): 26-27



If Brenner would have been president, would Wisconsin have broken from Missouri? I don't know. Let me put it this way... If we had broken in 1955 (some pastors at that convention were personally ready to break in 1955)...and I was fearful of that... it would have split our synod because for a synod to take action you have to have the backing not only of the delegates there but of the general pastors and congregation. And I don't think in general there was a vast majority to take that kind of action as far as synod wide is concerned and some of them would not have gone along with it. I think it takes time for a synod to come to that kind of agreement.

Though this conclusion is very speculative, if Brenner was president two or more years longer, the Wisconsin Synod probably would not have broken from Missouri any sooner. In fact Brenner himself "was instrumental in slowing down the move to sever fraternal relations with Missouri because he did not feel" that the people of the Wisconsin Synod were well informed.<sup>139</sup>

Therefore, because Wisconsin would not have broken with Missouri, the CLC still would have broken with Wisconsin. Brenner was very good friends with Edmund Reim, the secretary of the Standing Committee, for those many years. Reim was one of the leading pastors to break off and form the CLC. Brenner would not have had any more influence on him as president than he did as a good friend. Richard Schwerin records a somewhat heated encounter between Brenner and Reim which he most likely heard from John F. Brenner, President Brenner's son:

Shortly before Professor Reim left our synod, he visited Pastor Brenner. On this occasion Pastor Brenner sought to impress on Professor Reim that as an educator, he should realize that it would take time to lead WELS people to the facts and then to digest them. Since he was in the heat of the battle, Professor Reim knew for years where the Missouri was headed, but the rest of WELS did not have that opportunity. Professor Reim had set his time-table, and that time-table which he had set dictated a break when he declared it. His attitude included chiding Pastor Brenner for not being "faithful to the Word." Professor Reim's attitude and closed mind saddened Pastor Brenner a great deal.

Schwerin also records that Brenner "felt responsible for Reim's leaving the Wisconsin Synod." He felt that way because frequent meetings were necessary for the rising intersynodical problems. Brenner "relied on Seminary faculty members to present WELS in these doctrinal matters." Because of this many of the "Seminary faculty members had firsthand experience with the seriousness of Missouri's aberrations long before the rest of" the synod. These men grew frustrated because it was hard for them to understand why the rest of the synod did not recognize the seriousness of the situation with Missouri.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Schwerin, : 7.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid:6-7

From this account, Brenner could not influence Reim even in his own home. “Professor Reim had set his time-table”<sup>141</sup> might refer to Reim having been influenced by the ELS breaking fellowship in 1955. Reim was more ready to break after the ELS had broken first and he was rather disappointed that other Wisconsin pastors were not willing to follow him. So from this evidence, the speculative answer would be that even if Brenner was president all the events would have remained closely the same.

### **Brenner as advisor to Standing Committee on Matters of Church Union**

In 1953 after Brenner stepped down from the presidency and chairmanship of the Standing Committee, President Naumann requested that Brenner would continue as an advisor to the Standing Committee because of his experience. Since Brenner was 78 at the time, he only served this role for five years before he retired from the public preaching ministry completely. As various meetings records show, Brenner did not attend every meeting. However, he still had influence in the meeting where he was present. Besides these meetings, there is not much information or influence that Brenner had in intersynodical relations.

### **Brenner was strong-willed even to the end**

Even till his last years on this earth, Brenner was trying to help the Missouri Synod. As a young child, John M. Brenner (grandson of John W. O. Brenner), vividly remembers the last time President Behnken of Missouri spoke to Brenner in person:

When I was about nine or ten my father received a phone call from my grandparents to let him know that Pres. John Behnken of the Missouri Synod was in town and was coming over to their house to pay his respects to my grandfather. They wanted my father to be there. For whatever reason my father decided to take me along.

I remember standing in my grandfather’s living room as Pres. Behnken and a local Missouri Synod pastor came through the front door. My grandfather was an old man and was confined to his easy chair because his legs had given out on him. He couldn’t walk without help anymore. As Pres. Behnken came through the front door he said to my grandfather in what sounded to me as a somewhat patronizing way, “Ya John, we had a lot of good times together.” My grandfather looked at him and said, “There weren’t so many good times!” Then my grandfather lit into him for everything Pres. Behnken had allowed to happen in the Missouri Synod. I don’t remember that Pres. Behnken said anything in reply.

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<sup>141</sup> These words from Edmund Reim may seem to paint a bad picture of him. It must be noted that Reim was a strong and faithful leader in the Wisconsin Synod and did much for President Brenner in matters of intersynodical relations. Reim should continue to be respected for being a faithful servant of God.

After about five minutes Pres. Behnken looked at his watch and said, “Well, I have to catch my train.” He and the Missouri Synod pastor then left the house.

It was my impression that my grandfather knew that he wouldn’t live much longer. This was the last opportunity he would have to speak with Pres. Behnken and he wanted to remind Behnken that it was his responsibility to take the lead in straightening out the Missouri Synod.

Watching this exchange made a deep impression on me.<sup>142</sup>

Listening to this story, many might have thought John W. O. Brenner was being a jerk. The opinions of his son and grandson, would say otherwise. President Brenner’s son, John F. Brenner, recalls him bluntly scolding President Behnken saying that if Behnken had “stayed in his office and attended to business, Missouri wouldn’t have [had] such problems.”<sup>143</sup> President Brenner still served with his pastoral heart—preaching law and gospel when at times they needed to be preached. President Brenner was a Christian pastor, friend, and brother till the end. A year later, Brenner went to his heavenly home on September 30, 1962.

## CONCLUSION

John W. O. Brenner had been criticized by various people over the years, but it was never for his lack of leadership when dealing with the Missouri Synod. People criticized him for “lack of mission zeal,” though he was mostly cautious in spending money having come out of the Great Depression. People criticized him for his “all business” approach to meetings and conventions, though he got the job done and moved matters along. The same people who criticized him for his bluntness also say that those he criticized had it coming. Members of the Wisconsin Synod appreciated Brenner for the many things he had done for the Synod—bringing the Synod out of debt, transitioning from German to English, beginning *The Northwestern Lutheran*, and especially leading the Synod through dark times with the Missouri Synod.

Members of the Missouri Synod, on the other hand, may have been more critical of President Brenner, though not all. Brenner’s bluntness was said to turn some off. His sarcastic sense of humor rubbed some Missourians the wrong way. At the 1952 Synodical Conference convention, it is hard to say if Missourians were booing Brenner for his personality. More than

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<sup>142</sup> John M. Brenner (email contact November 29, 2014)

<sup>143</sup> Braun, “‘He was a man and a Christian’: The Life and Work of John W.O. Brenner” *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, 27:2 (October 2009): 21

likely they were booing because they did not like what he was reporting. Many Missourians were tired of hearing all the accusations. They were tired of Wisconsin holding them back in fellowship discussions. In spite of the criticism, Brenner was honored and respected. President Behnken thought highly enough of Brenner to visit him one last time and pay his respects.

Looking back at the events that took place, John W. O. Brenner was indeed the right man to arise at the right time for the Wisconsin Synod. For years through his own words and through the Standing Committee, he warned Missouri of that path they were going down. Through these words, many in Missouri recognized their situation and either left Missouri or stayed to help Missouri get back on the right track. The Wisconsin Synod most of all benefited from President Brenner's leadership by preventing them from going down the same path as Missouri. Brenner was instrumental in making sure the synod on the congregational level knew what was happening between the two synods. Under Brenner's influence, Wisconsin continued to hold firm to the truth of God's Word and did not stray from it toward unionism. A few pastors once remarked, "I felt and still feel that President Brenner *led* the Synod, whereas the presidents we have had since then [have] *represented* the synod" (emphasis added). Brenner was "one of the great gifts of God to our church, a man who was absolutely the right man for that job and that time, but—if you understand me right—a man who would never make it [in the ministry] today. It's a different time."<sup>144</sup> Perhaps Brenner's personality would not have made it today because he was a man of his times.

However, perhaps pastors today can learn a few things from Brenner's example. Today's pastor can learn from history and they specifically can learn from past mistakes and achievements of pastors that have gone before them. That being said, what things can pastors learn from President Brenner and apply to their ministry today? Although the majority of pastors will not be presidents or synod officials, they will still be leaders to the people in their congregation. There are many things a pastor can learn from President Brenner in the area of intersynodical relations.

First, Brenner was very well read in what was going on in Lutheran synods and other denominations. The thing that inspired this thesis was the frequent question, "What is the difference between Wisconsin and Missouri?" It really is a pastor's duty to know what is going

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<sup>144</sup> Braun, "He was a man and a Christian": The Life and Work of John W.O. Brenner" *WELS Historical Institute Journal*, 27:2 (October 2009): 34.

on in other Lutheran or Christian denominations in general. It is a pastor's duty to let his people know when it is important or be prepared to answer when asked. With technology today, people are able to find out what is going on if they want to, but not all information is correct. For those who will not go looking for it, a pastor is the only means by which his people could be notified. Being the editor of *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Brenner had his face buried in the many things going on in Lutheranism, so it was fairly easy for him to stay up-to-date. A pastor today has many more distractions and may not be able to take the time to stay up-to-date. However, he can always look information up on the internet or contact someone to get the information when asked. This is a responsibility a pastor has to his congregation—to guard his congregation against false doctrine and to build them up in the truth.

Second, Brenner did not care for being “scholarly” educated, but he knew his Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. It seems today that pastors are well read in their Bible and that is a good thing, but their reading of the Lutheran Confessions is lacking. A pastor really must know the Lutheran Confessions so he can tell the difference between other Lutheran and Christian denominations. The Lutheran Confessions are the key basis for intersynodical relations. C. F. W. Walther used the Unaltered Augsburg Confessions as his basis for discussions with other Lutheran groups.

Third, Brenner made a point to stand firmly on the doctrine of God's Word. He did not waver or compromise so that truth would be lost. A pastor cannot always please both sides. Eventually he must take a stand and that stand is on Scripture. Not only must his doctrine be founded on the Scriptures, but his practice must be in agreement with his doctrine. This is difficult especially with “American Lutheranism” around every corner—a bug of unionism that threatens to infect the church. A pastor, who has his faith founded on the truth and will not yield to it, will a good leader for his people.

Fourth, Brenner acted as a gentle and firm brother when his brothers in the Missouri Synod were in spiritual danger. A pastor must be his brother's keeper when it comes to doctrine. No, he must not judge, but must let the objective truth of God's Word be the judge. When a brother is in danger of giving up that truth, he must be chastised and pointed back in the right direction. Though it may be difficult, it is the loving thing to do and it is a pastor's responsibility as a fellow Christian brother to be there.

In the future, new issues will rise up, doctrinal controversies will be evident, and pastors are looked upon to clear up such things. Who know what the future holds! As long as a pastor immerses himself in God's Word, and is well informed and not ignorant, he will be able to attend to such doctrinal controversies in a stern, but loving manner. President John W. O Brenner did this for his congregation and for his Synod in his time. As descendants of such a great company of witnesses, pastors of the Wisconsin Synod and beyond learn from the past and continue to lead God's children.

## APPENDIX A

### WELS/LCMS Timeline before, during, and after Brenner's Presidency<sup>145</sup>

#### 1931-1938

**1931** – Missouri Synod produced the “Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod” (“Brief Statement”)

**1932** – Missouri Synod adopted the “Brief Statement”

**1934** – The Atlantic District of the Missouri Synod drafted memorial to the Synod to set up an Army and Navy Commission to recommend men to the US government for service as military chaplains.

**1935** – US government made an official request to Missouri Synod for military chaplains.

Missouri Synod passed a resolution authorizing an Army and Navy Commission to investigate the assurances which had been given that Missouri's principles would be honored by the government. (Missouri met every three years in convention)

**1937** – After receiving the same request from US government, the Wisconsin Synod convention recommended to appoint a committee to look into the issue of military chaplaincy.

**1938** – By the Missouri Synod Convention, several Missouri Synod chaplains already serving in the armed forces. Missouri Synod enters government chaplaincy program.

American Lutheran Church (ALC) at their convention states “We are firmly convinced that it is neither necessary nor possible to agree in all non-fundamental doctrine” (doctrines revealed in Scripture but not absolutely necessary for saving faith)

Missouri Synod convention resolved that their “Brief Statement” and the ALC's “Declaration of Representatives of the American Lutheran Church” (“Declaration”) be regarded as the doctrinal basis for future church fellowship.

President Brenner appoints special “union committee.”

#### 1939-1944

**1939** – WELS decides against participation in government chaplaincy program, but will call civilian chaplains.

The Wisconsin Synod convention declares LCMS/ALC union basis unsatisfactory and calls for one document.

Representatives of the ALC and United Lutheran Church of America (ULCA) made doctrinal agreements with each other.

**1940** – The Synodical Conference asks LCMS not to enter into fellowship with ALC and calls for one document.

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<sup>145</sup>Combined from two sources: Armin, W Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference: Ecumenical Endeavor*. Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000 and John M Brenner, “Forward In Christ: Doctrinal Challenges And Language Change.” *WLQ* 97:3 (2000):164-191

**1941** – The Wisconsin Synod convention unanimously rejected participation in the chaplaincy once again adding that the chaplaincy conflicted with the synod’s doctrinal stand on the divinity of the call.

The LCMS convention resolved to continue negotiations with the ALC, but calls for single document.

**1942** – No Synodical Conference convention because of World War II.

**1944** – The LCMS and the ALC produce the joint single document “Doctrinal Affirmation”

The LCMS convention made a distinction between “joint prayer” and “prayer fellowship;” scouting was left to the individual congregation; calls their joint efforts with synods outside its fellowship, “cooperation in externals.”

In a letter to the Synodical Conference, the Wisconsin Synod through President Brenner voiced their opposition against these issues of the Missouri Synod, “We have been seriously perturbed by numerous instances of an anticipation of a union not yet existing, or as it has been put, not yet declared.”

As a result of the letter the Synodical Conference established a Committee on Intersynodical Relations consisting of the presidents and two appointed men from each synod.

### 1945-1955

(**1944-1950** – E. Benj. Schlueter of Wisconsin Synod president of Synodical Conference.)

**1945** – “Statement” of the 44.

**1946** – ALC rejects *Doctrinal Affirmation*.

The Synodical Conference sets up Interim Committee to investigate Army/Navy chaplaincies and church/ministry matters.

**1947** – The LCMS reaffirmed the “Brief Statement” and set aside the other union documents as basis for fellowship with the ALC

**1949** – LCMS and ALC agree on *Common Confession—Part One*.

WELS convention through President Brenner addressed six questions to the 1950 LCMS convention that claimed specific violations and called for direct answer

**1950** – LCMS adopts *Common Confession*.

LCMS President Behnken drafts a polite response rejecting WELS’s six questions that claimed violations in the LCMS.

(**1950-1952** – G. C. Barth of Missouri Synod president of Synodical Conference.)

**1951** – WELS and ELS find *Common Confession* inadequate. “Adoption creates untruthful situation.”

Professor Paul Kretzmann of St. Louis Seminary withdrew from Missouri along with a few others and formed the Orthodox Lutheran Conference.

(**1952-1956** – W. A. Baepler of Missouri Synod president of Synodical Conference)



**1952** – After Synodical Conference St. Paul convention, WELS delegation declares itself to be in “a state of confession.”

**1953** – At the WELS convention, President Brenner steps down as president and Pastor Oscar J. Naumann is elected in his place.

*Common Confession—Part Two* is drafted.

LCMS reaffirms 1950 acceptance of *Common Confession*.

LCMS publishes “A Fraternal Word.”

WELS publishes “A Fraternal Word Examined”

LCMS publishes “Another Fraternal Endeavor”

**1954** – WELS issues 11 pamphlets treating main issues in controversy.

LCMS publishes “A Fraternal Reply.”

Synodical Conference convention at East Detroit and Chicago devote all sessions to Intersynodical problems.

**1955** – ELS suspends fellowship with LCMS, but remained in the Synodical Conference and in fellowship with WELS.

WELS at Saginaw convention delayed vote on break with LCMS until 1956 after LCMS convention.

Professor Reim declared his continued fellowship with WELS only under clear and public protest. He resigned as secretary of the Standing Committee on Church Union and placed his resignation as president and professor the seminary before the synod and seminary board.

Convention gave Reim a unanimous vote of confidence, seminary board did not accept resignation, and Reim remained as president of the seminary.

### **1956-1961**

**1956** – LCMS convention withdraws *Common Confession* as document for fellowship with ALC.

WELS recessed convention holds judgment of Saginaw resolution in abeyance.

(**1956-1960** – John Samuel Bradac of Slovak Synod president of Synodical Conference.)

**1957** – WELS New Ulm convention rejects resolution to break with LCMS but will continue “vigorously protesting fellowship.”

**1959** – Oakland, first Conclave of Theologians with “overseas brothers.”

WELS accepts Synodical Conference statements on Scripture and Antichrist. WELS statement on Fellowship.

**1960** – WELS union committee declares impasse in discussions with LCMS on fellowship.

Conclave of Theologians meets at Thiensville (Mequon).

Impasse reported to Synodical Conference.

## APPENDIX B

### President Brenner's Convention Devotions by Year

These Presidential Addresses are included because of their *timely* nature to those current events in the world and synod at that time. They give key insight to President Brenner's pastoral heart on a synod-wide level. They are also included because their *timeless* nature is beneficial to all people.

#### WELS 1939 Synod Convention

Watertown, Wisconsin, August 2, 1939.

*Dear Brethren in Christ our Lord:*

"Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.

Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work." [- 2 Thessalonians 2:15-17]

As we are gathered here in these days to hear the reports on the work of our Synod, to plan and resolve for the new biennium, and to encourage and strengthen each other in the service of our Lord, let us, moved by the grace of God which He declares to us, heed the admonition of the inspired Apostle Paul.

In these days when we hear so often of "new challenges to the Church" and when there is an almost feverish activity in the churches, his calm but earnest "Stand fast!" may indeed sound strange to our hearts.

Are we, then, to shut our eyes to the great changes that are taking place everywhere and to the conditions that surround us? No, indeed. We are to observe the life of our day very closely, and that not from the standpoint of the statesman and the economist, but from the standpoint of the child of God, who knows full well that even external things may affect our inner life.

We Christians, do, indeed, feel the impact of the forces of evil. When unbelief stalks boldly through the nations, and when there is a widespread decline in morals, there is grave danger for our youth, and not only for the youth.

A more insidious danger is this, that the Christian is unconsciously drawn into a life that is not of God, but of this world. The most of our children receive their education in schools that are not Christian and there imbibe ideas and acquire ideals that are contrary to the Word of God. The close associations which they form with such who are not of our faith constantly tend to loosen the ties that bind them to their church. The life of the world enters our homes through the theater, the radio, and the press, and makes its influence felt. There are common pursuits and endeavors into which old and young are drawn. Some of these are harmless in themselves, yet they may serve as a means to achieve the ideal that is being greatly stressed in our days, that the community should absorb the individual entirely with all his interests. But the Bible declares that we are "strangers and sojourners" in this world.

In the churches we find indifference in doctrine and practice and unionistic tendencies. The humanitarian religion of works is being spread most diligently. It reaches the ear and heart of our members, and no one can deny that it is full of appeal to the natural man within us.

There are some of the dangers that we must recognize and that we have to meet in our work and through our work. But these are not new dangers, neither are there new needs that must be met. New means are neither required nor possible.

God alone can save man and heal him. He does this by his grace in Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him he gives us “everlasting consolation and good hope.” The grace of God comforts the conscience-stricken sinner with the forgiveness of his sin and fills him with the hope of eternal life. Christ is our justification and salvation. The grace of God breaks the bonds of satan and sin and sets us free to serve our Lord “in every good word and work.”

But this saving grace of God is revealed in his written Word and is effective through the Word. That is why the apostle admonishes: “Stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.” By the Word we have been taught in our Evangelical Lutheran Church, we have obtained “everlasting consolation and good hope through grace,” and by that Word everything good that is in us has been effected. By the Word we have carries the blessings of grace to others, and the Lord has signally prospered our work.

Only as we hold fast the traditions we have been taught, do we continue and grow in grace, bring saving grace to other men, and successfully fight against the powers of darkness.

When speaking of “standing fast, and holding the traditions,” the apostle has in mind the living personal faith by which we lay hold on, and cling to, Jesus as our only hope in life and in death. mere intellectual knowledge of true doctrine and insistence on it do not benefit a man nor make him a contender for the faith after the heart of God.

Only he who daily rejoices in the “everlasting consolation and good hope” given him by grace through the Word, can truly love the Word. And he will fight for the truth as for life itself, refusing to surrender one jot or tittle of the divine traditions, and rejecting any compromise with error.

He will “speak the truth in love,” for he is not moved by personal pride and contentiousness, but by his reverence and love for the Word and his earnest desire to win the gainsayer for the truth.

Under the guidance of God, circumstances have brought it about that we will at this convention have to discuss the printed report on “Lutheran Church Union.” Let us approach this subject in the spirit of our text in order that our deliberations may please the Lord and further his kingdom.

If we permit the Lord to direct us, the present discussion will prove a blessing to us. “Stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught.” The pure confessions of our Lutheran Church have come down to us from the fathers who fought for the truth. But such a heritage is not a dead possession that can be handed down mechanically, it must be acquired anew by those who would enjoy it.

In times of, as least comparative, peace, we are likely to grow careless. Now, that we are hearing the call of the Lord, let us obey his Word, which is a directive for all our work in the congregations, missions, and the Synod. If we stand fast and hold the traditions, we will keep our rich heritage and hand it down to our children intact; we will become more fruitful “in every good word and work”; we will victoriously battle against all the forces of evil that would not let us hallow God’s name nor let his kingdom come; we will strengthen our brethren in the faith, and by our testimony prove error. The dangers of our time call for a thorough indoctrination of our church members.

Brethren in the ministry, let us make room on our schedule for regular, intensive, prayerful study of the Bible, and then impart the fruits of our labors to the souls entrusted to our

care. How can this be done? Preach Scriptural sermons that lead the hearer into the Scriptures, and follow up the work when you make your pastoral calls; instruct your confirmation classes carefully, and do not confirm adults after six or seven lessons; conduct Bible classes for the old and the young; place one or more of our church papers into every home, and recommend helpful books to your people; and, above all, make every possible effort to found a Christian day school in your parish. Try to induce your members to send their sons and daughters to our own higher educational institutions.

That is the quiet spiritual work to which our Lord has called us, the work that he has promised to crown with his blessings. May we ever be found faithful, and may the Lord establish us in every good word and work.

## WELS 1941 Synod Convention

Saginaw, Michigan, August 6, 1941.

*Dear Brethren in Christ:*

“For thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One in Israel: In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength.” – Isaiah 10:15

Evil were the days in which Isaiah brought this message of God to his people, for then began the great struggle of the nations for the world dominion which was to culminate in the mighty Roman Empire, and vast changes were to come about in the political, economic, and social life of the peoples. The world was facing a dark and fearful future.

Dwelling in the midst of the pagan nations, the chosen people was not to remain unaffected. In fact, the Northern Kingdom had already succumbed to the power of Assyria and had passed out of existence, and now there fell upon the life of Judah the dark shadow of the rising power of Babylon foreboding the things that were to come, that Judah, too, would lose its freedom and for seventy years endure the humiliation and hardships of exile in a pagan land, its homeland meanwhile lying desolate and waste.

There was fear in the land. Many saw imperiled only the possessions that even the natural man holds dear, freedom, home, and perhaps, life itself. But there were also those who had a deeper understanding and felt a greater concern. The nations striving against each other for power and glory are pagan nations, but we are a nation founded on the covenant of God’s grace, the bearer of the Promise, God’s chosen people. Will the covenant stand, can the Promise be fulfilled, if we are overpowered by a heathen nation?

A mighty upheaval is in our days shaking the world to its very foundations. The changes in the political, economical, and social life of the nations are so rapid that the eye can hardly follow them, and under the surface there is in progress a great revolution in thought, ideals, and moral conceptions.

The future is dark, and no one is able to foretell what the conditions will be when this bloody conflict is ended.

The Christians of today are not found fathered chiefly in one nation; they are scattered throughout all nations, some already in the thick of the turmoil, while others, like we, just beginning to learn what are the burdens and griefs of war. Christians cherish their earthly blessings, freedom, home, their way of life and their life itself, and desire to keep them, but their chief concern is their personal relation to God, and their most important question is, “How will the Church be affected by these things, and how will its work fare under the conditions that will finally prevail?”

We must prepare, and be strong, said Judah. And it was right. This is not a time, was we are often rightly warned, for a weak and sluggish Church; the Church must be strong!

But let us heed the warning of Isaiah. Judah counted its men and arms—dismay—we are not strong enough to fight Babylon. But hold, there is Egypt, similarly threatened. An alliance with Egypt will bring us victory and security; and that alliance was made in spite of the earnest warnings of the messenger of God. The Lord had tried Judah, and Judah had failed him.

In times of danger and stress, we are only too prone to look to man for help. Churches then are easily tempted to seek the favor of the world, to adopt its ways, and to employ its means. Have we not frequently been told that an outward union of all Christian churches would be more successful against the attack of the forces of evil, and that the combined efforts of men of all religions could soon set this world right? Are not alliances and compromises that are contrary to the Word of God often justified with the plea—“this is an emergency”?

But Isaiah cries: “Thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest shall ye be saved.” Yes, the Lord God is Israel’s God. He chose this nation, built it up, let it forth from Egypt, gave it the land of milk and honey, guided and protected it. Israel is built on the covenant of grace. It is the bearer of the Promise, a priestly nation. The Lord is its strength and its salvation.

And the Lord has not lost his power, he still rules the nations; he has not been, nor will he ever be, swerved from his gracious purpose: his every promise will be fulfilled; and his ways are always ways of truth and holiness.

But Israel had turned from the Lord, despised His grace, denied its priestly character, and had begun to reason and to live after the manner of the Gentiles. That was its downfall. The Lord is now using the pagan nations as a scourge upon the back of Judah, and there is no escape from His judgment. Human power and aid are of no avail, and the alliance with Egypt can bring only greater shame and disaster.

Therefore the call: “Your salvation is in the Lord.” Turn back to Him and an honest confession of your sins, rest in His grace, trustingly seek His pardon. He will graciously pardon you and again take you to His heart as His dear children. Then be quiet; submit humbly to His chastening; cast away your self reliance and trust implicitly in His promise. Then He will be your strength, and your heart will be free from fear and filled with joy and hope.

Let the heathen nations rage and storm, He will protect His own; let change what will, His Promise will stand sure, and the remnant of Judah will be found in the land of the fathers at the coming of the Promised One.

May the Bible story that tells of the glorious fulfillment of this prophecy warn us, comfort us, and teach us true wisdom to know and never forget where lies the strength of the Church.

The terrible conflict of which we are witnesses may make it appear that the weaker is at the mercy of the stronger, and that, after all, the will of man and his might will prevail. But the Lord has merely given rein to the evil passions of men to punish the world for its unbelief and ungodliness.

At his time he will cry a halt and make the war to cease, according to his wisdom again determining for all nations “the times before appointed and the bounds of their habitation” and bestowing upon each the earthly blessings he deems good for it.

God governs the universe for the good of His Church. It is His Church. He counseled it from eternity; He laid the foundations in Christ; His Holy Spirit build it. The Church is not dependent on any man or on human power, nor on external conditions. The powers of darkness may trouble it, but they will never be able to impede or to halt its progress. The Lord is in his Church, and “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Its glorious manifestation and eternal triumph are assured by divine promises that cannot be broken.

If only we return and rest. True, we have not fallen from grace nor turned to the altars or idols. Yet, there is among us so much neglect of the means of grace, lack of zeal for the Lord’s cause, self-will, careless living, and worldly mindedness. By omission and commission we so often deny our calling as kings and priests of God. While punishing the wicked for their sins, our God is not chastening us His people and calling us to repentance. Let us turn to Him in true remorse and confidently claim the grace He so freely offers, that He may remain our strength and our salvation.

Then let us strive for quietness and confidence. If the Lord should in His wisdom afflict us more grievously than He has until now, let us humble ourselves under His hand, stifle the

voice of fear and murmuring, and trust that His chastening will yield “the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.”

Let us constantly and prayerfully endeavor to put out of our personal, congregational, and synodical life everything that His grace has not worked in us and that hinders the working of His grace, self-will, pride, envy, striving, and love of the world.

Then we will be wise in His wisdom and strong in His might to adhere steadfastly to His Word without yielding as joy or tittle, to confess Him boldly against His haters, to labor faithfully according to His will, and to battle valiantly and fearfully against the forces of darkness with the Sword of the Spirit.

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;

Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. Selah.

There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High.

God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early.

The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: he uttered his voice, the earth melted.

The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

Come, behold the works of the LORD, what desolations he hath made in the earth.

He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire.

Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.

The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.”

Psalm 46

“In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength.”—May these words of the Lord guide us in our deliberations here at the convention and in the performance of our tasks in our home churches.

## WELS 1943 Synod Convention

Watertown, Wisconsin, August 4, 1943

“See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.” - Eph. 5, 15-17.

Though the admonition of our text, “redeem the time,” may in the connection in which we find it refer to something more specific, it is nevertheless general in character, applying to the entire life of the individual Christian and of the Church.”

We are living and working in a world in which conditions are constantly changing. There are days of peace and quiet, and days of war; seasons of plenty, and seasons of famine; times of joy and contentment, and times of sorrow and grief. Even our natural life requires that we be wise, seeing the situation clearly and meeting it so that we are not harmed by it, but benefited.

But things do not simply happen. God rules the universe. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variableness neither shadow of turning,” the Scriptures tell us, and on the other hand, “Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?” “Our days” are under His governance, and behind every blessing we receive and every affliction we have to bear is His all-wise purpose towards us. This purpose He wants us to understand and in true wisdom to strive to do His will.

But does not Paul say: “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out?” True, in a sense, God will always remain a hidden God whose greatness man’s mind cannot compass and whose wisdom it cannot fathom, but even that knowledge of God which we can have and must have is not acquired by our own endeavors. “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God.” The mightiest judgments of God do not change him. He will be crushed and go down in despair, or he will harden his heart all the more and continue in his evil way to work out his eternal destruction.

But God says: “I am the Lord thy God which teacheth thee to profit, which leadeth thee by the way that thou shouldest go,” and Paul writes to Timothy: “The Holy Scriptures are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

Those whose hearts He has enlightened by the Gospel the Lord admonishes to be wise and to redeem the time. They are “to discern the signs of the times” and diligently learn and do the will of God.

“The days are evil.” Since we were gathered together in 1941 our country has been drawn into the war that is shaking the very foundations of the world. It is not necessary to go into details in picturing the destruction and horrors of World War II, for there is no one on earth that is not affected and moved deeply by it. If we would be wise, redeeming the time, we must ask, what is the meaning of all this that is going on about us? The answer we find in the first chapter of the letter to the Romans: “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold truth in unrighteousness.”

But we are not wise if we stop here. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” We have not always redeemed the time while the days were good. What neglect of the Means of Grace was not found among professing Christians, what laxness in our private and our church life, and what worldliness! In the days of peace and plenty we have often withheld our offerings from Him and thus have slowed the progress of the Word and failed to redeem the precious time of grace.



But the Lord has not withdrawn the Gospel from us. Above the din of the battle and the groans of the dying, we hear its compelling invitation as did God's people of old: "Remember these, O Jacob and Israel; for thou art my servant; I formed thee; thou art my servant: O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of me. I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I redeemed thee."

The fruit of true repentance is the renewal of our life. Paul writes to the Corinthians: "I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance, for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of; but the sorrow of the world worketh death."

"For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear; yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea what revenge. . . In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in the matter."

Thus our gracious and merciful God would in these days of evil lead us to true repentance, try and strengthen our faith cleanse us of all impurities, and make us fruitful in all good works. To those who do not resist His grace, all sorrows will be turned into joy, and all afflictions into blessings. "No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous but grievous; nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."

"As wise, redeeming the time." When Isaiah says, "Lord, in trouble have they visited thee, they poured out a prayer when thy chastening was upon them," He teaches us another us of adversity, another lesson that we are to learn in our affliction. When the Lord by His might breaks down a man's trust in his own right arm and through afflictions drives home in him the truth of the law that all his righteousnesses are as filthy rags, and then comes to the despairing on with His loving invitation, "in me is thy help," He teaches him to pray; and that is a most valuable lesson.

Too often our self-sufficiency stands between us and a grace the Lord would bestow on us. "Ye have not," says the Lord, "because ye ask not!" No one lives wisely who is not instant in prayer; no one redeems the time who does not make his days days of prayer. How earnestly does not the apostle admonish us: "I exhort, therefore, that, first of all supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." A praying church is a rich church, and a strong church.

"As wise redeeming the time." The Lord is still continuing the existence of the world only for the sake of the preaching of the Gospel, which is, therefore, the most important things in our life.

Wisdom demands that we hold it fast as our most precious possession and permit no one to take it from us. Our days are evil also in this respect. God's truth is being contradicted from many sides, and Satan seeks in devious ways to corrupt it.

It would be sinful foolishness to say that we are at the present time too busily engaged in the momentous affairs of our earthly welfare to give our interest and devote our time to questions of Christian doctrine and practice.

Peter warns his readers: "Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our days should be filled with the teaching and hearing of the Word. “let the word of Christ dwell in our richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”

If we ourselves employ our time in hearing and teaching the word at home, we cannot be neglectful of the souls of others. This is still time of grace for the entire world, and “God wants all men to be saved and come unto the knowledge of the truth.” “Therefore,” says Paul, “my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that our labors are not in vain in the Lord.”

As we observe the signs of the times, we cannot but note that the days of this world are rapidly drawing to their close that the time of grace is limited. God grant us to redeem the time in true wisdom, working while it is day: “the night cometh, come no man can work.”

## WELS 1945 Synod Convention

1945

“Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.” – 1 Samuel 15:22

*Dear Brethren in Christ our Lord:*

There are times that try mens’ souls. The seven days at Gilgal were such a time for King Saul, who was standing ready to engage with the Philistines. He had a word of God that he was not to go into action before the arrival of Samuel. But the prophet delayed, while the Philistines were daily increasing their forces and gathering them at Michmash. The terrified Israelites, practically unarmed, began to hide themselves in caves, thickets, rocks, high places, and pits, and day after day more of them were reported as absent without leave.

An emergency, indeed. The people of God stood in danger of being crushed utterly by the pagan nation. Saul’s heart was filled with fear and with growing impatience: he felt his responsibility as king. Good generalship demanded that he act before the remainder of his followers would join those who had already deserted. It would be necessary, however, to “make supplication to the Lord” before going into battle; and Samuel had not arrived. Saul knew full well that this was not within the province of his duties, but the kings of nations on occasions sacrificed to their gods, and would the Lord not in view of the grace emergency, if not approve, at least condone such action on his part? “I forced myself therefore,” he reports to Samuel, “and offered up a burnt offering.”

God’s answer is: “Thou hast done foolishly; thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God, which he commanded thee.”

The Lord did not remove Saul from the throne at once. The king continued to reign and was granted many victories. But he soon proved that his heart had not changed.

The measure of Amalek was full. The Lord now commanded Saul to carry out the judgment threatened in the days of Moses, Exodus 17: 14-16, by destroying the Amalekites and all their possessions. Saul “utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword”, but he spared the life of King Agag and kept the best animals of their flocks and herds.

What moved him to do this: the fear of his people; pride in holding a king prisoner; the consideration that it would be an economic waste to destroy the good animals; or really a pious intent of his own conception? Did Saul himself know, this utterly confused man on whose lips unctuous piety and gross untruthfulness mingle as he in the face of the clearest evidence still protests that he has obeyed the Lord?

But this defense with which the king is seeking to still his conscience and to convince Samuel breaks down abruptly before the decisive words of the prophet: “To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.”

O misguided man, I do not need thy sacrifices, nor do I require thy wisdom and strength as a leader, a statesman, and economist, and a warrior. I am the King of the people I have chosen in the Promised One. Have I not proved this in the past? Hast thou forgotten my mighty works?

And my wisdom will guide this nation in the future, and my might will protect it. In thee, a chosen instrument in my hands, I seek nothing but childlike faith and the fruit of that faith, implicit obedience to my word. At Gilgal thou didst not trust me to be faithful and able to save my people in the emergency, and now thou hast raised up thy head in sinful pride to disobey my word in following thy own wisdom and will.

God’s judgment is: “Because thou has rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king.”

These are times that try our souls. To ignore this fact, would not be wisdom on our part. The political, economic, and social upheaval that has taken place throughout the world has not been without effect on religious thought and life. As to these, a great part of humanity has drifted from its moorings and is being tossed about precariously by the wind and the waves.

Religious leaders are alarmed over the increasing liberalism in doctrine and morals and the outspoken antagonism to the Church, or, as it is often put, to organized religion, and are urging a united front of all churches against the forces of evil. On the other hand they are looking forward with eager hopes to what they call tremendous opportunities and are girding themselves to meet the “challenge” of the post-war days. This holds good particularly of leaders whose eyes are directed to this earth rather than to heaven.

Partly owing to conditions brought about by the war, there is only too noticeable a decline in public morals and an increase in juvenile delinquency, and serious men and women are earnestly endeavoring to overcome these evils and to create a better and nobler society, not only in our own land, but also throughout the world. And they look to the churches for aid and support in their undertaking.

While we do not permit such expressions of fear and hope to sweep us off our feet, we fully realize that this is not a time for complacency and indolence, but that our Lord calls us to be alert and ardently zealous in his work.

But let us be prayerfully careful that ours is not a “zeal not according to knowledge”. Being energetically active is not always an acceptable service to the lord that furthers his purpose for his Church. Let us heed the warning example of King Saul and keep in mind the lesson of our text. “To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams”, and approach all matters pertaining to the life of our synod in implicit obedience to the Word.

There are such matters that did not originate in our body but nevertheless demand our attention and on which we will finally have to take a stand. Permit me to make mention of a few of these issues.

- 1) The issue of Lutheran Church Unity, or, as some would have it, Union. See report of Our Committee on Lutheran Church Union.
- 2) Cooperation in Externals—See “*Church Union*”

Many further instances of such “cooperation in externals” could be adduced in addition to those mentioned in my letter to the Synodical Conference. We cannot well discuss this issue fully in this report, but the following excerpt from a letter written by me to the secretary of a Lutheran Regional Council will inform you what stand your representatives are taking:

But your letter seems to indicate that the founding of individual missions is not the chief thing you have in mind. You speak of a “duplication of efforts” and of “competition between Lutheran bodies” and urge “the need for a united front on the part of the church” warning “that such needless competition cannot help but be detrimental to the cause of Lutheranism and of the Christian church as a whole.”

In doing this, you are overlooking the fact that there are differences that are separating Lutheran church bodies from each other, or are minimizing these differences to such an extent that you are able to hold that “a united front”, which means a certain cooperation, is possible in spite of them. In this we cannot agree with you.

We realize clearly and deeply deplore the harm that is being done by the division in the Lutheran Church, but we are firmly convinced that the welfare of our Lutheran Church and of the Christian Church as a whole will be truly served only when we frankly acknowledge these differences in doctrine and practice as actually existing and as being divisive of fellowship, and when we then by prayerful searching of the Holy Scriptures endeavor to arrive at the unity that is the work of the Holy Ghost. You will always find us most willing to take part in doctrinal discussions which have this purpose.

“Cooperation in externals” (what in church work can truly be said to be purely external?) may hide our wounds, but it will not heal them. Joint endeavors will not remove the existing differences, but it may lead us to forget them and to grow indifferent to the authority of the Inspired Word.

A united front that, after all, is only a front, will not strike terror in the heart of the foes of the Church, nor will it make for the rigorous wielding of the Sword of the Spirit by men rooted in the Truth and zealous for it.

No, we are frank to state that we see a grave danger to our Lutheran Church in the cooperation in externals that is being advocated so strongly in these days. A violation of love in the founding of a mission may here or there disturb a community, but the propaganda for cooperation in externals by bodies not one in doctrine and practice reaches much wider circles and, wrong in principle as it is, works, much greater harm by confusing and misleading our people. I will refer only to the "Lutheran Standard", February 3, 1945, p. 9: "Hats Off to Portland", through many more instances would be adduced.

May the gracious Lord ever keep our steps in the way that leads to true unity. One in His Truth, we will be strong in His Might, and hearts that are united in Him, will meet each other in a cooperation that is truly pleasing unto Him.

### 3) Other entangling alliances.

"No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier." 2 Tim. 2:4.

This word of God formerly meant to us that a pastor and his church as such should devote themselves in a single-minded manner to the ministry of the gospel, carefully refraining from meddling with the affairs of this life, in which the Christian as an individual certainly has part.

Now we hear the opinion expressed that a pastor and a church as such owe something to the public, namely cooperation with others in the building of good citizenship in the community.

This is a question that demands serious study, but some brethren have already anticipated the answer by allying themselves as Lutherans with agencies or organizations outside of our Church. The most disturbing case in point is that of the introduction of Boy Scoutism into our Church.

We hold that the Scout program still contains elements of religion; that it perverts the teachings of Holy Scriptures; and that, therefore, the Scriptures bid us to avoid it. According to our firm convictions, the book "Scouting In the Lutheran Church", which is the product of a joint committee of Lutherans not of one fellowship, is rendering our Lutheran Church an outstanding disservice.

These instances reveal a definite trend of thought and action away from the position we have held until not. Shall we yield to this trend?

We, too, like Saul at Gilgal, have felt the stress of emergencies. We know that power our emotions have over our judgment. There is a strong appeal in the vista of far-reaching planning and world encompassing operation in the work of the Church, and there is a certain force in the reasoning that only a united front and the cooperation of all Lutheran bodies can insure to us the place to which we are entitled and enable us to do our work efficiently. We are fully aware of the fact that "public opinion" is in favor of such concerted action. The Wisconsin Synod church and pastor who refuse to unite with the council in this area will be separated, at least in a measure, from a sister church of the Synodical Conference. As the Council is to deal with Government agencies in the name of all Lutherans, we may meet with some difficulties in serving our men in Government hospitals, etc.

Shall we yield? The Lord is King. He rules, guides, and protects his Church. He opens doors and shuts them, and as the experience of Paul shows, his plans often are not the same as ours, however sincere and zealous we may be. But his planning must prevail, his will be done. He has given us his Word. By it alone the Church is built, and not by our wisdom, enthusiasm, and numbers. The Word is to govern our lives and our work, and we are to obey it to the last jot or tittle. Samuel said to Saul: "When thou wast little in thine own sight, was though not made the head of the tribes of Israel?" When we in true repentance for our sins and acknowledgment of our frailty and insufficiency humble ourselves before the Lord and look to his Word for

comfort, guidance and strength, then we are truly serving the Lord to his pleasing, building soundly, and battling victoriously. “To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.”

“Only be though strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left that thou mayest prosper whithersoever though goest.” Josh. 1:7.

## WELS 1947 Synod Convention

Watertown, Wisconsin, August 6, 1947

That we, “speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.” –Ephesians 4:15, 16.

*Dear Brethren in Christ Our Lord:*

Our convention is to serve the building of the temple of God, the edification of the body of Christ. The Church grows when more and more are added who with us confess Christ Jesus their Lord and Savior.

In our deliberations and resolutions we concern ourselves chiefly with this increase. Our Mission Board reports to us on the progress of the old fields, on the number of missions begun in the past biennium, and on the souls gained. Our institutions present their work to us and tell us how many students were enrolled and how many graduates now are ready to enter the service of the Church.

We try to help our missions and institutions solve their many problems and endeavor to reach as many souls as possible with the man-power and the means that are available to us.

That there is a crying need for this work, particularly also in our days, does not even have to be stated. So many fields open to us, so many souls in dire spiritual want; and the Lord has entrusted them to our care. Surely, this is not a time to grow indifferent, weary or discouraged; we dare not now relax our efforts. Called as laborers together with God in the building of His temple, let us, by His grace, prove ourselves faithful and diligent workers. May all that we say and do here serve this purpose, and may we then go home to our churches carrying this admonition and encouragement to them.

### **“Unto the Edifying of Itself in Love”**

Yes, to our churches and to all their members. Important as the men in the public ministry are to the Church, they are not the Church, nor the only ones to preach the Word by which the Church is built. Our text tells us that every member does this within the sphere assigned him and with the first of the Spirit granted him.

*Our Synod is not the work of the ministers.* It is the work of God through the churches by the Word. Behind the whole work of our Synod stand the faith and love of the Christians in our congregations. When their faith and love are strong, the work of the Lord will prosper; when they grow weak, it languishes. (We feel keenly and confess penitently that we have thus often failed the Lord who never fails us.)

Edifying the body of Christ, we see, does not only mean that we bring sinners into the Church, but also that we build up in Christ those who have been won, that we use the Word “for the perfecting of the saints.” This work is easily slighted as it does not appeal to the natural man, who delights in results that are visible and tangible. It is possible to neglect one’s own soul while solicitously caring for that of the neighbor. Casting our eyes too far afield may make us blind to immediate opportunities and duties.

But it is the gracious will of God that all believers be brought to their full maturity in Christ “in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God,” “no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, but the sleight of men and cunning, whereby they lie in wait to deceive,” and constantly increasing in love.

As the individual member grows up into Christ, the head, the Church progresses and gains strength for her labors and her battles, for His gracious power works mightily in the heart of each believer, confirming him in the faith, enriching him with the gifts of the Spirit, and making him fruitful in good works. Our Synod will be able to meet its call to preach the Gospel to all men and to overcome all opposition to its work according to the measure in which our members are being built up in Christ. Let us not slight this part of our work. No one will deny that it is sorely needed. And it required no additional man-power, nor new, scientific methods and means. Simple sound preaching and teaching of the Word, faithful pastoral work, and the mutual brother-service for which the Spirit equips every Christian, will achieve the gracious purpose of our Lord.

In this work, earnest and prayerful attention must be given to our children and our adolescents. They are members of the body of Christ. For their greater happiness and their preservation unto everlasting life, they are, according to the Lord's will, to attain their spiritual maturity. as the future workers in our Synod who are to take over where we, called from our labors, leave off, they must be kept in the Church and be trained for the spiritual service they are to render.

You are right when you immediately think of our Christian day schools, Sunday schools, confirmation classes, and Bible classes. They are the most precious means for joint work in the building the Church. Let us foster them diligently and keep them conscious of their sacred purpose.

But, we are told by some that our churches should do more for the young. They suggest new organizations that provide safe environment, social life, recreation, and amusement for our children and adolescents. We cannot here and now discuss this subject. But we can call to attention to the fundamental fact from which all thought on this matter must proceed: God Himself has founded an organization to which He entrusts the care and training of the young: which He has ordered and equipped so wisely that no other organization can supplant it or complete with it, and which He hold accountable for the faithful performance of its duty—the CHRISTIAN HOME.

Many of the evils of our day are rightly attributed to the breaking down of the home life among us. Are all the homes of church members truly Christian homes filled with the presence of the Lord? The remedy? Further aids of all kinds? No, indeed. So much "aid" may be offered that the home loses the sense of its responsibility. So much of the time of the young can be claimed by organizations that the home cannot establish and maintain its influence over them. In the case of inter-congregational organizations, the home church, next in importance to the home, is similarly affected. If the Church is to be built soundly, the home must be made conscious of its duties and willing to perform them. Let us as wise builders endeavor earnestly to restore and strengthen the Christian home among us.

Called by the Lord, Joshua rendered Israel most valuable service as a warrior and a leader, but an even greater contribution to the common good was the quiet work of Joshua, the father which came to light when he on the great day of decision was able to declare to all the people: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord," and the people were moved to respond: "The Lord our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey."

God grant us grace to build diligently and wisely and bless our work.



## WELS 1949 Synod Convention

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, August 3, 1949

“Jesus saith unto them, My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, finish his work. Say ye not, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest. And he that reapeth receiveth wages; that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together. And herein is that saying true, One soweth and another reapeth. I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labor; other men labored, and ye are entered into their labors.” - John 4:34-38.

*Dear Brethren in Christ our Savior:*

“I sent you to reap”—with these words our Lord Jesus greets us at the opening of our convention, thus striking the key-note that is to resound in all our thoughts, words, and acts, as we are gathered here. Does He always find a ready response among us?

When the Lord mentioned the harvest, His disciples immediately thought of the four months that would be required to ripen the grain. That was a thing they could understand. They still saw chiefly the natural aspects of life, and so we also are ever inclined to see and to think as the natural man does and only too often find ourselves lacking the spiritual understanding that should dominate our thoughts and actions at all time, particularly when we are engaged in the work of our home church and that of our Synod.

Not that our Savior would despise the so-called natural things; His words show us that no one has ever penetrated more deeply than He into every phase of human life, nor appreciated more fully its every problem, joy, and grief. And to Him nature means more than it does to us.

But here He is, as verse thirty-four tells us, speaking as the one who gave Himself without reservations to the all-important task assigned to Him by the Father, that of saving a lost world by His vicarious suffering and death. The disciples were still to see the crowning act of that redemptive work; we are privileged to look back upon it. Perhaps that will lead us to hear from His words, “Lift up your eyes,” the urgent plea, Learn to see the world as I see it, to see it in the glorious light of my Cross.

His interest was at this moment not in the coming harvest of grain. No, He saw the Samaritans coming to Him through the field and, as His glance swept over them to encompass the whole world and to penetrate all ages to the Day of Judgment, He beheld before Him a composite picture of all mankind.

He was not attracted by the glories of the world, the achievements of our race in all the fields of human endeavor. He looked beneath the brilliant surface to see the deep misery and the awful fate of men, all of whom without a single exception were sinful and guilty in the sight of God and subject to His everlasting punishment. But in the light of His Cross He beholds these very sinners as men redeemed, reconciled unto God, and justified before Him. They are the fruitage of His bitter sufferings and death, His very own, bought with the price of His blood. They are precious to Him, and it is His burning desire that every one of them be brought to Him in a living faith to find life in Him. And it is for this work of gathering the harvest that the Lord sends His believers out into the world. The terms, “sowing and reaping,” the Lord employs to define this task are of great significance. The farmer works, and works hard, when he sows the seed into the ground, but his labors do not produce a crop. The life is in the seed; and God put it there. The harvest is His gift to men. Similarly the Lord provides the living seed that produces the spiritual harvest we are to gather. This seed is the Word of God. Peter calls it the incorruptible seed by which men are born again, the seed “which liveth and abideth for ever.”

Paul says: "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."

We are not more than God's husbandmen and can add nothing to the effectiveness of the Word. Any attempt to do this can only obstruct the power of the Word. Paul confesses this: "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, **even as the Lord gave to every man.** I have planted, Apollos watered; but **God gave the increase.**"

This truth is impressed on our minds more deeply and other thoughts are added by the words of the Lord: "I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labor: other have labored, and ye are entered into their labors."

As we begin the observance of the Centennial Year of our Synod, it is only natural that our attention centers in the details of its history. To understand this rightly, we must, however, see it against the background of the story of the entire harvest. This began immediately after the fall of man, and it will end on the Last Day. It is planned, and the Lord is at its head; His hand ever guides its affairs. In His wisdom He raises up men, and some of these have been very lonely men, and forms groups to serve in a particular manner not only their own generation, but those as well who are to follow them in the years to come. For two thousand years Israel was the bearer of the Promise. After the heroes of the faith and the prophets of old, we have John the Baptist, the apostles of the Lord, many church fathers, and our Dr. Martin Luther. Think of the many who battled for the truth without fear, not a few of them sealing their confessions with their blood. And then there are the rich contributions to the common cause made by many writers, preachers, teachers, and missionaries.

Thus the fathers of our Synod, too, labored, and fought, and we "are entered into their labors." They sowed, and we are reaping as we are in our hearts, homes, classrooms, and churches, enjoying the blessings of the unadulterated Word of God they have handed down to us. The saying is fulfilled: "One soweth, and another reapeth."

"I sent you"—this the Lord says to every believer personally, but it applies as well to our Synod. The Lord who founded it and has prospered it to this day has given it a place in the economy of His harvest. We have a duty to our own generation and to posterity, to the distant as well as to the immediate. What place He has assigned us, we do not know. The future is hidden from us, for the Lord does not disclose His plans to us, but our duty is clear, very clear: We are to sow, to preach and teach the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is quiet work that does not intrigue the natural minds, work which the world will never understand nor applaud: but it is a sacred and most important task, for by it the harvest of our Lord is furthered.

The burning zeal which we see in the Lord as we read the story of the woman at Jacob's well should make us strong to overcome all selfishness, indolence, and neglectfulness, and to do our God-given task with ardor and devotion.

But, let us remember, we are to sow good seed, not tares. The sowing of tares is the work of the enemy who hates the Lord and His harvest. We dare not tolerate that false doctrine be taught in our Synod, nor can we work in fellowship with errorists.

If the apostles had permitted the council to silence them, or had yielded to the pressure of the heresies they had to combat; if Athanasius had, in order to gain security and ease entered into a compromise with Arius; if Luther had recanted to be at peace with Rome, or had grasped the hand of fellowship extended to him by Zwingli in order to unite all protestants for the battle against the pope; if our fathers had not found the spiritual courage to sever their relations with unionistic church bodies of Germany, and under the circumstances it was by no means easy to do

this: would we count them obedient servant of the Lord that sent them and faithful laborers in His harvest?

When we expose and rebuke error, and separate ourselves from it, we are doing effective sowing of the Word and proving our love for the Lord and for His harvest. May He ever grace our Synod true faithfulness to His Word.

“He that reapeth receiveth wages.” This promise of our Lord should dispel the fear that so often steals over our heart and the worry that embitters our souls. It should give us courage to carry on under all circumstances. But we must not misunderstand Him. To some laborers, at some times, He grants the joy of seeing abundant fruits, but not to all, and not always.

Faithfulness to the true mission of the Church has not the promise of immediate success and visible blessings. It may, on the contrary, bring losses, bitter conflicts, and fiery trials. We all know the plaint of the faithful Elijah: “I, I only, am left: and they seek my life to take it away.” We have death. Of the “Father of Orthodoxy” it was said: “Athanasius against the world, and the world against Athanasius,” and he spent years in flight from those who sought his life. Luther’s days were restless days, filled with conflict.

But this promise assures everyone who sows in obedience to the Lord that his efforts are never in vain and that his labor is never lost. He may never see it here on earth, but he has done his part in the divine plan for the consummation of the great harvest. He will receive a full and satisfying reward on the day when the Son of Man will come to judge the quick and the dead, “and shall send his angels with a great sound of trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” “He that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: That both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.”

And now, a final thought. We will rejoice together in heaven. But we do not have to wait till we meet there in order to share each others happiness and to walk with each other in true brotherly love. The very work in which we are engaged should united us closely. In it there is no room for selfishness, pride, or personal ambition, and, therefore, no cause for envying and jealousies. John the Baptist shows the right spirit when he says: “He must increase; I must decrease,” humble selfeffacement, single-minded devotion to his task, faithfulness to hi Lord.

May the Lord grant us to work together in this spirit at this convention, constantly mindful of His call: “I sent you.” Wisconsin Synod, “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season.”

## WELS 1951 Synod Convention

Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, August 8-14, 1951

“And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are through Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.” - Philippians 1:9-11.

*Dear Brethren:*

In making this prayer of Paul our own, we are at the opening of our convention asking for ourselves and for each other the blessings which the apostle seeks for the Philippians. And rightly so, for their needs are our needs at all times, and particularly at this time when we are gathered here as delegates to the Synod to do the work for which we were chosen by the brethren at home, for God alone can guide our hearts aright, and all our labors are futile if He does not crown them with His blessings.

The fact that in this prayer love is placed into the foreground does not mean that Paul is falling in line with the many who today declare that all the world needs is love and who are convinced that humanity is able to kindle it through understanding.

No, this love is love of *the Gospel, the fellowship, the Church*. Without it we would be “as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.” This love goes out to our fellow-men not because they are human and possess certain fine qualities, but because God has wondrously begotten them again and placed them at our side as confessors of the faith and defenders of the truth, as fellow-laborers and sufferers, and as fellow-travelers on the way to our eternal home. We need this love both here at our convention and at home, for it “suffereth long, and is kind—envieth not—vaunteth not itself—is not puffed up—doth not behave itself unseemly—seeketh not her own—is not easily provoked—thinketh no evil—rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth—beareth all things—hopeth all things—and endureth all things.”

In many of the matters that will come before us, our vote will be the expression of our purely human judgment, and in such matters two faithful Christians may disagree. It is only natural that the majority resolution must prevail, and they of the minority will in true brotherly love submit to it and give their honest support to the measure.

But this love for the brethren does not spring up and exist by itself. It flows from our love for God, is based on it, and governed by it. It is the fruit of our faith in the saving grace of God, and the evidence of its sincerity. That is why the apostle prays, “that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent.”

When our faith is a living faith and our love of God is sincere, our earnest endeavor will be to please Him and to do what He declares to be excellent. Nor has He left us in uncertainty, for He has revealed Himself in His inspired and inerrant Word, and the Spirit of Truth who has led us to faith opens our understanding to this Word and moves us to adhere to it and to obey it implicitly.

In matters of doctrine and practice where God has spoken, we cannot yield to the wisdom of any man, nor to the authority of any group.

The love for man which would demand disobedience to a single word of God is a false love, offensive to our God and harmful to the errorist. Let us keep this in mind when we discuss, and take our position in, matters of doctrine and practice which are determined for all men by the Word of God.

In our work in the Church we are dealing with divine truths and eternal values, waiting and hoping for the “day of Christ” when He will come again to judge the quick and the dead and to consummate His Church. On that day we want to be found by Him “filled with the fruits of righteousness, unto the glory and praise of God.”

As it is he “which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure,” let us earnestly seek his guidance in implicit obedience to His Word in order that all the actions of our Synod may redound to His honor and to the good of His Church. We have the promise, “Ask, and it shall be given you.” Amen.

## **WELS 1953 Synod Convention**

Northwestern College, Watertown, Wisconsin, August 5-11, 1953

“Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them; for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.” – 1 Timothy 4:18.

*Dear Brethren:*

The most important matter which we are to discuss and on which we are to take action at this convention is that of doctrine. We know that there are those who consider doctrine more or less of minor importance. They hold that it is of greater value to do what is right than to believe and teach the full truth. They are willing to fellowship even those who adhere to an error and are ready to cooperate with them.

This is an error, for the Church is created by doctrine; its one and only call is to preach it throughout the world; and it alone can make us willing and able to carry on the work we are commissioned to do. In fact, our Synod is founded on doctrine, and its entire life revolves about it.

We are to take heed unto the doctrine, continue in it, that is, we are to be diligent in preaching it and prayerfully careful to avoid error in any form. We do not dare to grow uncertain of the doctrine which we proclaim, not become tolerant of a violation of the truth to which they persistently adhere who want to fellowship with us. We are dealing with the authoritative revelation of our God and with the eternal welfare of our own souls and the souls of those who hear us.

“Take heed unto thyself.” No one will want to deny that the conflict in which we are engaged is fraught with danger to our own soul. We are tempted to make this a battle for the intellection supremacy, or to look down in the pride of self-righteousness on those whose errors we oppose. Let us not forget that it is the pure, undeserved grace of God that has kept us to His truth, and let us cling to the truth because it saves our soul.

We may grow tired of the combat. They who deviate from the Word of God in doctrine and in practice are applauded by the world and gain great numbers, though they are not building the Kingdom. It is not an easy matter to be called a separatist and to be accused of the lack of a Christian spirit. Let us not forget, “We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.”

We are easily influenced by our surroundings. The spirit of the world bears down upon us. Neither pastors, teachers, nor church members are immune to it. Are we actually following our God’s injunctions, “that yet walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called?” Our text is *our Lord’s call for self-examination and true repentance*.

Yes, by all means, let us here and throughout the year take heed to the doctrine, but let us at the same time prayerfully take heed to ourselves.

## APPENDIX C

### Milwaukee Sentinel article on John W. O. Brenner's Retirement

MILWAUKEE SENTINEL

# 'Pastor J. Brenner,' Giant Among Lutherans, Retires

By JAMES M. JOHNSTON

The Rev. John Brenner, six-foot ramrod of Lutheran conservatism, has retired from the ministry, the Southeastern Wisconsin District of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States (Wisconsin) Synod announced Friday.

Having left the pulpit of St. John's Lutheran Church, 804 W. Vliet St., two weeks ago, Pastor and Mrs. Brenner this week prepared to take a trip.

When he stepped down in 1953 as president of the Wisconsin Synod, after 20 years, Pastor Brenner was one of the most influential clergymen of the Middle West.



REV. JOHN BRENNER

Upon retirement as synod president

#### REJECTED 'MODERNISM'

His long shadow steered pastors and laymen down the straight canyon of theological orthodoxy. All forms of "modernism," or "compromise of doctrine" were repugnant to him and those he influenced. The synod then had about 315,000 members, mostly in the Middle and Far West.

Outside his circle of fellow-Wisconsin Synod pastors and friends, little is known of the serious-minded, stern but polite church statesman who in his later years refrained from giving interviews or public statements, and rarely attended public church events other than synod conventions or special meetings.

He won't tell his age, but he's believed to be well past 80. He won't talk about his career or education, though he's renowned as a Bible student, with enough scholarship to be called "doctor" several times over. But he calls him-

self simply "Pastor J. Brenner."

But he will make some things clear:

● His thorough belief in Scripture—as it is written.

● His conviction that the church and state should stay apart, and that pastors have no business mixing in politics or "telling the state what to do," as he said in his last convention sermon in 1953 at Watertown. He believes, too, that pastors and churches should stay out of print.

● His belief that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is making a mistake in some of its church practices, like refusal to prohibit Scouting, negotiating with lodges, and co-operation in some fields with other church bodies. He was one of the leaders in the Wisconsin Synod movement to break with Missouri.

Close friends held him in near reverence. At the start of the Watertown convention in 1953, when he urged the synod to elect a younger man president, a sincere voice from the convention floor thundered "No!" "No!" The convention did elect a younger president, but Pastor Brenner received several votes.

At the end of the convention delegates gave him a vote of thanks and made him an ad-

visory delegate to all future conventions and a permanent advisory member of the Church Union Committee, which steered the synod in its doctrinal debate with the Missouri Synod.

Delegates also agreed with President Oscar J. Naumann when he called the retiring president "a man of God, a man of principles and a man of conviction."

Even those who disagreed with him acknowledged that forthrightness was as much of a part of Pastor Brenner as was orthodoxy.

#### 'PUT ON BRAKES'

For a man about to retire, he presided over that Watertown convention with exceptional ginger, insisting that the delegates move along on schedule and cautioning them frequently to "put on their brakes" in the time-consuming debate over what to do about the Missouri Synod.

He took none too seriously the parliamentary principle that a presiding officer ought to stay out of the debates. He punctuated the sessions with his own comments on various reports:

Audiovisual education: "That's a craze today and I don't hold with it. We are dealing too much with visual aids. We've got to be careful lest films that show undoctinal material contrary to synod beliefs find their way to the congregation."

The R S V Bible: "Other church bodies have hurriedly adopted this new version. I would advise that our committee study it slowly."

This, however, showed more tolerance than some conservative non-Lutheran Protestants, who advocated that the R S V version "be burned."

No man can move him, either by flattery or threats. His only fear is the conscience of "J. Brenner."

If he dislikes this publicity about his retirement he must remember one thing. This reporter, too, is following his conscience in refusing to let a pastor as prominent as "J. Brenner" retire without some mention of it outside of his congregation.

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