

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF  
"A STATEMENT OF FORTY-FOUR"  
IN THE HISTORY OF THE MISSOURI SYNOD

Paul S. Naumann  
Senior Church History B  
Prof. Fredrich  
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- I. Introduction
- II. Content and Context
  - A. The "Statement" and the Controversy
  - B. The Historical Background
    - 1. Negotiations with the ALC
    - 2. Other Developments
- III. The Purpose
  - A. Good Intentions
    - 1. "Love and Truth"
    - 2. A Legitimate Cause for Concern
  - B. Bad Intentions
    - 1. Unionism
    - 2. The Doctrine of the Church
    - 3. Their Method
- IV. The Result
  - A. Apparent Failure
  - B. Ultimate Success

On September 7, 1945, in Chicago, Illinois, a group of forty-four pastors and professors in the Missouri Synod affixed their signatures to a document which has since come to be known simply as "A Statement." In an attempt to estimate its importance Herbert Lindemann, one of the original signers, admits that while Nicaea and Chalcedon may perhaps have been "more epoch making meetings in the history of the church, there have been few of lesser [sic] significance for the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod."<sup>1</sup> One can only wish that his apparent misstatement were true. Though it was only three pages long "A Statement" left such an impact on the synod that it crystalized two directly opposing positions and brought about a greater degree of polarization than Missouri had ever experienced. In order to understand the effect "A Statement" had and what role it played in the subsequent history of the Missouri Synod we will examine what its purpose was and how well that purpose was achieved. Since we are concerned primarily with its historical significance, a study of its doctrinal content is not within the scope of this paper.

"A Statement" was intended by its signers as an appeal to the pastors of the Missouri Synod to reject what they called "a strange and pernicious spirit, utterly at variance with the fundamental concepts of the Gospel and the genius of the Lutheran Church, [which] has lifted its ugly head in more than one area of our beloved Synod."<sup>2</sup> The "Statement" contained twelve theses, most of them consisting of an affirmation as well as a "deploration." Among the things deplored were:

a loveless attitude manifesting itself within Synod . . . expressed in suspicions of brethren, in the impugning of motives, and in condemnation of all who have expressed differing opinions concerning some of the problems confronting our church today; [Thesis IV]

a tendency in our synod to substitute human judgments, synodical resolutions, or other sources of authority for the supreme authority of Scripture; [Thesis II]

all man-made walls and barriers and ecclesiastical traditions which would hinder the free course of the Gospel in the world; [Thesis III]

any tendency which reduces the warmth and power of the Gospel to a set of intellectual propositions which are to be grasped solely by the mind of man; [Thesis VII]

the tendency to apply [the] non-Biblical term ["unionism"] to any and every contact between Christians of other denominations [Thesis IX].

The most significant theses were V and XI, which read in full:

We affirm our conviction that sound exegetical procedure is the basis for sound Lutheran theology.

We therefore deplore the fact that Romans 16:17, 18 has been applied to all Christians who differ from us in certain points of doctrine.

It is our conviction, based on sound exegetical and hermeneutical principles, that this text does not apply to the present situation in the Lutheran Church of America.

We furthermore deplore the misuse of First Thessalonians 5:22 in the translation "avoid every appearance of evil." This text should be used only in its true meaning, "avoid evil in every form." [Thesis V]

We affirm our conviction that in keeping with the historic Lutheran tradition and in harmony with the Synodical resolution adopted in 1938 regarding Church fellowship, such fellowship is possible without complete agreement in details of doctrine and practice which have never been considered divisive in the Lutheran Church. [Thesis XI]

Following the "Old-Missouri position" on church and ministry, which the signers heartily espoused, Thesis VI stated: "We believe that there should be a re-emphasis of the privileges and responsibilities of the local congregation [as opposed to the synodical organization] also in the matter of determining questions of fellowship."

On September 20 this "Statement" was mailed out with an explanatory letter to all the Synod's pastors, despite the "vigorous protests" of Pres. Behnken.<sup>3</sup> By the time Behnken had returned from a trip to Europe, the controversy was in full swing. Over 200 more individuals had added their signatures to the "Statement." In order "to ventilate the situation" Behnken called a meeting of the Praesidium and District Presidents to meet with the signers on February 14 and 15, 1946. For this meeting the "statementarians",

as they had come to be known, prepared a set of twelve papers explaining the individual theses, only two of which were actually read. (These papers were subsequently published together with the "Statement" in a pamphlet entitled, Speaking the Truth in Love).<sup>4</sup> In his memoirs, Behnken describes the outcome of this meeting and the measures he took to "resolve" the problem:

It was decided at this meeting that the issues be examined and resolved, if possible, by a joint committee -- 10 men from the signers and 10 to be appointed by me to represent "the other side." (Let me add that if I had to do it over again I would never accept such an assignment.)

The "Ten and Ten" had a series of meetings under the chairmanship of President W. H. Meyer of the Kansas District, chosen by mutual agreement as an "impartial" man. It became apparent that the "Ten and Ten" could come to no satisfactory solution. Both the Praesidium and Chairman Meyer agreed that further meetings would serve no useful purpose.

Then the members of the Praesidium themselves took the matter in hand by meeting with representatives of the "Forty-Four." As a result the spokesmen of the signers agreed to withdraw A Statement as a basis for further discussion; the Praesidium in turn agreed that the issues that had been raised be presented in a series of special study documents prepared by men whom I should choose.

During the next few years five such Scripture-based studies by unnamed authors were sent to Synod's pastors. . . . Our pastors were given some very excellent and meaty material which should have sent them deeply into the Scriptures and evoked many a profitable discussion. The "Forty-Four" as an organized group has long since gone out of existence. Today one hears only an occasional reference to it.<sup>5</sup>

A brief look at the larger historical context of the "Statement" will give one a better understanding of the theological climate that was prevailing throughout Missouri during these years.<sup>6</sup>

Ever since the demise of the "Chicago Theses" fellowship effort in 1929, a group began to grow within the synod which was determined not to abandon the effort to expand the borders of Missouri's fellowship. Kurt Marquart tells us of "a prominent St. Louis seminary scholar" who stated in a graduate class in July 1968

. . . that the "progressive" movement got started in a smoke-filled pastor's office in New York City in 1930, when 3 LCMS pastors . . . decided, after Synod had turned down the Chicago Theses and had

authorized the drafting of the Brief Statement, that they would start a movement to "change Synod." Their goals were to prepare the LCMS for outreach into America by use of English (vs. German), and by moving toward a more open doctrinal stance.<sup>7</sup>

That was the year (1930) in which the newly formed American Lutheran Church joined the American Lutheran Conference, and also sought to establish fellowship with Missouri. In 1932 Missouri's "Brief Statement" was adopted. The two groups began discussions based on this document in 1934. When in 1938 the ALC issued its "Declaration" which was to clarify certain points in the "Brief Statement" Missouri passed its controversial "1938 Resolution<sup>5</sup>." With these it accepted both documents "as a basis for future church fellowship" pending "full agreement" on non-fundamentals, and the approval of "the whole matter" by the other synods in the Synodical Conference. When those other synods strongly urged that a single joint statement be drawn up, Missouri resolved to do so in 1941. In 1944 the "Doctrinal Affirmation" was submitted as the requisite "one joint doctrinal statement," but was subsequently rejected by both the ALC and Missouri<sup>5</sup>. Later efforts produced the two-part "Common Confession." These negotiations with the ALC were without question on the minds of the "statementarians" when they met in Chicago in 1945. That Chicago meeting was in fact the culmination of a series of discussions in Chicago in 1926, 1937, 1940, and 1941, all of which had been concerned with the same issue.

A number of other developments during these years also point to the partial success of those who wished to "change Synod." In 1938 Missouri joined the national chaplaincy program. Three years later at the Columbus Conference the synod began cooperating "in externals" with the other members of the National Lutheran Council. Clifford Nelson finds cause for rejoicing in the fact that "The meeting marked the first time in history that the Missouri Synod had joined in prayer with council Lutherans."<sup>8</sup> At the Saginaw convention

in 1944 there were two more significant developments. Missouri abandoned its former opposition to Boy-Scouting, and at the same convention, passed a resolution which approved a distinction between prayer fellowship and joint prayer.-- the very distinction which Missouri's Missionary Brux had found it necessary to repudiate only nine years before.

None of these drastic changes which had taken place during the ten years prior to the "Statement" were as easy for Missouri to adopt as they are for us to report. They met with definite opposition from all corners of the synod. (It is interesting to note that one of the leaders among the "statementarians", Theodore Graebner, in a very bitter article which he wrote only seven months before his death, blasted the "Wisconsin Synod faculty and editors" for, among other things, having "supplied the theology for the attacks on our 1935, 1938, 1941, and 1944 resolutions on fellowship."<sup>9</sup> Despite his generosity, our synod must, in all modesty, decline to accept all the credit. There were many in Missouri who were also well aware of the problem.) It was the "Statement", however, that especially served to solidify the conservative element in Missouri.

When one reads "A Statement" aware of its historical setting, the purpose of its authors is readily apparent. Thomas Coates, one of the youngest of the "Forty-Four", informs us: "It was to stimulate the Missouri Synod to re-examine its theological heritage, to reinvigorate its evangelical spirit, and to exert a restraining force upon the legalistic tendencies that were in ascendancy at the time."<sup>10</sup> Their two-fold concern is expressed in the title of the collection of essays which defended its theses: "Speaking the Truth in Love." The "Forty-Four" were concerned with expressing the truth; they were concerned with promoting a greater atmosphere of love in the synod.

We cannot deny that there are many things in the "Statement" which are very sound and true in themselves. Thesis II contains a beautiful statement

on the inspiration, inerrancy and authority of Scripture. This is of primary importance when church union is a hot issue. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find anything wrong with the affirmative portions of the first four theses, if read objectively.

Unfortunately, even the antitheses of the first theses contain a good deal of truth. The examples that Graebner and the others produced to substantiate their claims of legalism and lovelessness in Missouri during those years are hard to refute.<sup>11</sup> The signers were particularly concerned about what they called "traditionalism." E. W. A. Koehler<sup>12</sup> wrote an excellent reply to the "Statement" in which, among other things, he objected to the accusation that there was a "tendency to substitute human judgments, synodical resolutions, or other sources of authority for the supreme authority of Scripture." He objected on the grounds that while some may have been guilty of such abuses on occasion, <sup>they were</sup> ~~that it was~~ not so widespread and so frequent as to actually be called a "tendency." While we would generally agree with most of what Koehler has written, I'm not so sure we would be willing to agree with him on this point. It has been noted a number of times, especially more recently, that one of the primary problems in Missouri today is its "tendency" to deal with its problems by quoting its constitution and by-laws rather than Scripture. Although August Pieper is reported to have spoken an occasional generalization himself, he once stated: "Wir konnten die Missourier nicht mit der Bibel überzeugen; da wir ihnen aber Walther vorlassen, da glaubten sie uns." We need not take all of the rantings of Graebner with a grain of salt. There definitely were a number of serious problems in Missouri in the 30s and 40s.

However, while the "Forty-Four" were perhaps reacting to legitimate evils in their synod, their reaction went too far. When we look at the doctrinal content of their theses, when we leave the realm of the general and examine the clear and pointed statements that they made, notably Theses V and XI,



then we can see the heart of their concerns and what really caused the uproar.

In their apology to the "Statement" they make a number of claims that are difficult to accept: "The only adequate and accurate interpretation of the Statement must be based on the words of the theses themselves and not on any imagined historical background. . . . The meeting in Chicago was not called for the purpose of promoting Lutheran Unity in America."<sup>13</sup> Even though the authors of that statement undoubtedly wrote it in all sincerity, they must have realized that it is impossible to completely tear such a document from its context. Anyone who read the "Statement" in those years, whether within or outside of Missouri, could not possibly have read it in a completely objective light. Even though it was intended only to state a general principle, the application of Theses V and XI is obvious. They even paraphrased it in so many words: "[The theses voice] the conviction . . . that the official position of the Lutheran bodies in our country who differ from the Synodical Conference is not such that Romans 16:17, 18 can be quoted against them."<sup>14</sup> Although one of the signers spoke these words at a vantage point of 25 years in the future, he was probably not exaggerating when he stated, "Even at that time the Forty-Four might have favored Missouri's entry in the NIC and the IWF -- possibly even the WCC."<sup>15</sup>

The basis for such thinking was the fact that the statementarians were dealing with a radically different concept of the doctrine of the church than that traditionally held by the Synodical Conference. They would have been (and in fact were) the first to state that. That is what "A Statement" is all about. They held that the "traditional" position of the Missouri Synod on fellowship extended back no farther than the turn of the century. It was not taught in Scripture, nor by Luther and the reformers, and not even practiced by father Walther himself.<sup>16</sup> The distinction between the visible and the invisible church was regarded merely as the product of Missouri's blind

and ignorant orthodoxism.<sup>17</sup>

The ultimate purpose of the "Statement" was to make propaganda for a doctrine of fellowship which is neither taught by Scripture, nor in keeping with "historic Lutheranism" or the traditional Synodical Conference position. When we recognize this, we can understand why they did not deem it improper to disregard the pleas of their president and to circularize the synod as an unofficial group. They felt it would be futile to go through the proper channels, since that way, they feared, a vast majority would never know about the "Statement" or be confronted with the issues it raised. "Direct action was called for -- let the chips fall where they may."<sup>18</sup> Koehler was perfectly justified in criticizing them not only for the content of their "Statement" but also for their method in disseminating it. This was especially the case because of the accusations it contained. For even if they were true, they should not have been "made indiscriminately, [since] no one [knew] who [was] meant." The effect of such public accusations from "men in prominent positions," might have led people to "suspect their own pastors."<sup>19</sup>

The stated purpose of the signers was to "speak the truth in love." Though they may have acted in good faith and with the best intention, in actuality, they neither spoke the truth, nor did they act in a particularly loving manner.

What were the results of their endeavor? Pres. Behnken seems to imply that, in his eyes, the effort was not a success. By 1962 he was able to write: "The 'Forty-Four' as an organized group has long since gone out of existence. Today one hears only an occasional reference to it."<sup>20</sup> There is a reason "A Statement" and its signers are rarely spoken of anymore. One of the signers, speaking in retrospect after 25 years, describes why it has already fallen into such oblivion:

I have regularly assigned the reading of the statement to my students.  
. . . . Invariably their reaction has been, in effect: "What's so

controversial about A Statement?" or "Do you mean that anybody actually objected to this thing?" To them it seems incredibly bland. Ah, the sweet innocence of youth!" 21

Obviously the position for which the "Statement" stood is taken for granted in Missouri today. The Statementarian controversy had a role to play in that success story.

Many regard the immediate result of the effort to have been a failure. Clifford Nelson comments on the withdrawal of "A Statement" "as a basis for further discussion": "This was, in many respects, a defeat for Missouri's 'progressives.'" He sees a partial explanation for that defeat in

the forthcoming celebration of the synod's centennial in 1947, when it would be only natural to uphold the "traditions of the fathers" and affirm loyalty to Missouri's repositioning theology. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the centennial observance was to be accompanied by a special "thankoffering," the success of which ought not be jeopardized by a spirit of theological permissiveness.<sup>22</sup>

While it does seem unlikely that the synod's officials would act from such mercenary motives, it cannot be denied that this factor may well have been a concern for them. I have a copy of a letter in which one of the men who served on the Committee of Ten wrote to a fellow Missouri Synod pastor: "With your intention to withhold your centennial collection until the matter is cleared up I cannot find fault, for after all, it will be there for Synod's use, if she remains true to the faith of the fathers."

The reason the principles advocated in "A Statement" did eventually win out in Missouri is probably due less to the effort of the statementarians than to the effort (or lack of effort) on the part of the synodical officials. Harold H. Engelbrecht, another of the signers, recalls: "Pres. Behnken's reaction was not as harsh as some claimed it to be. He objected to the procedure rather than the content. To my knowledge he never condemned the doctrinal contents of 'A Statement.'"<sup>23</sup> With all due respect to Pres. Behnken we can

safely say that his agreement to allow the signers to "withdraw the "Statement" as a basis for further discussion" created more problems than it solved. While the "Statement" as a document was withdrawn, the principles it proposed never were.

Such failure to practise doctrinal discipline when the situation required it soon became the policy which more than anything else was the cause of Missouri's downfall. No matter how much they assured themselves and others that "nothing has changed," ignoring the problems did not make them go away. I think we can safely make this generalization: if a church body's practise is allowed to be inconsistent with its doctrine, then eventually the doctrine will be made to conform to the practise.

Pres. Behnken himself eventually came to recognize where the synod had gone wrong, but by that time the problems were far worse than those that the statementarians had presented. Kurt Marquart writes:

Towards the end of his presidency Dr. Behnken had become very troubled about the situation, and he made no secret of it. At a theological conference in Thiensville in 1960, which sought to avert the imminent breakup of the Synodical Conference, Behnken said, sadly but with deep humility and honesty, that Synodical Conference principles had been violated in Missouri and that "some of these men have not been disciplined as firmly and as quickly as they should have been." He continued; "Our meetings . . . and also this caclave have convinced me all the more that it is necessary to emphasize and put into practise firmer discipline . . . We realize that the independent action on the part of a few -- who by some are called intellectuals -- has caused misgivings in the minds and in the hearts of our brethren within the Synodical Conference. We are sorry for these actions and we beg your pardon."<sup>24</sup>

ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup>Herbert Lindemann, "Personal Reflections on the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Publication of 'A Statement'" in Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly, 43/4 (November 1970), 164.

<sup>2</sup>From the accompanying letter sent to all the pastors of the synod. Quoted by E[dmund] R[eim], "Kirchengeschichtliche Notizen" in Theologische Quartalschrift, 43/1 (Januar 1946), 57.

<sup>3</sup>John W. Behnken, This I Recall (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), p. 191.

<sup>4</sup>Speaking the Truth in Love: Essays Related to A Statement, Chicago, Nineteen Forty-Five (Chicago: Willow Press, n. d. [1946]).

<sup>5</sup>Behnken, op. cit., pp. 119f.

<sup>6</sup>Information gathered from Carl S. Meyer, ed., Moving Frontiers (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), pp. 416ff.; Richard C. Wolf, ed., Documents of Lutheran Unity in America (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), pp. 379ff.; and E. C. Fredrich, "The Great Debate with Missouri" in Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, 74/2 (April 1977), 157ff.

<sup>7</sup>Kurt Marquart, Anatomy of an Explosion (Ft. Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977), pp. 80f.

<sup>8</sup>E. Clifford Nelson, Lutheranism in North America: 1914-1970 (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), p. 130.

<sup>9</sup>Theo. Graebner, "The Cloak of the Cleric" in CHIQ, 44/1 (February 1971), 10.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Coates, "'A Statement' -- Some Reminiscences" in CHIQ, 43/4 (November 1977), 159.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. especially Graebner's lead article in Speaking the Truth in Love, passim; and also The Cloak of the Cleric, pp. 5f.

<sup>12</sup>E. W. A. Koehler, An Analysis of "A Statement" (n.d.), pp. 1f.

<sup>13</sup>Truth in Love, pp. 4f.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>15</sup>Lindemann, op. cit., p. 165.

<sup>16</sup>The statementarians asserted that Missouri's "traditional" doctrine originated in an article by F. Bente, "Warum können wir keine gemeinsam Gebetsgottesdienste mit Ohioern und Iowaern veranstalten und abhalten?" in Lehre und Wehre, 51/13 (März 1905), 92-115, esp. p. 100. Koehler, op. cit., pp. 11f. gives a concise and accurate response to this claim.

<sup>17</sup>Graebner, Cloak, pp. 4-6.

<sup>18</sup>Coates, op. cit., p. 161.

<sup>19</sup>Koehler, loc. cit.

ENDNOTES (continued):

- 20 Behnken, loc. cit.
- 21 Coates, op. cit., p. 163.
- 22 Nelson, op. cit., p. 244.
- 23 Harold H. Engelbrecht, "concerning 'A Statement'" in CHIQ, 43/4 (November 1970), 170.
- 24 Marquart, op. cit., p. 89.

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