

The One Hundred Years of the Joint Synod: An Historical Survey

An essay delivered by Professor Walter Schumann

The essayist opens with the statement that his objective is a twofold one: to define the historical setting for the one hundred years, and then, to set forth the historical development in the Synod; put in another way, this means to portray the influence of "attacks" from without and then the struggle from within.

I. The Historical Setting

The years 1900-1950 might be aptly described by the one word "War", while the years 1850-1900 might be characterized by "revolution and reaction". But before the birth year of our Synod three revolutions took place that profoundly influence all life of that day and that have exerted their influence to this day. These are the intellectual, the political, and the industrial revolutions.

The intellectual revolution cannot be limited to one country of Europe, nor can it be fixed by a specific date. It was a development that reached its height in the "Age of Enlightenment." But we may trace its origins back to the Renaissance, which established the recognition of man as an individual in his relation to the state, and the Reformation, through which Luther established man's spiritual liberty, when God granted him the insight that the righteousness of God is an objective righteousness.

The political revolution had Paris as its center and from there spread out in concentric circles over all Europe. Russia was an exception, for this revolution became known to only a few individuals. There all attempts at revolution remained abortive until 1917. Then the counterfeit freedoms proclaimed by Lenin and Trotzky ended in the absolutism of the Polit-Bureau.

Though France was the parent of the political revolution, still there were influences from without, such as the revolutions in England and America, the struggle for the balance of power in Europe, the growth of nationalism, and the struggle for empire.

The industrial revolution began in England with inventions in the textile industry and the application of power to machines. Other factors in this revolution were the development of factory in place of cottage industry, the decline of agriculture, and the growth of cities with its attendant social problems.

Then the essayist proceeded to develop these revolutions in greater detail in order to show their influence on our Synod.

The INTELLECTUAL REVOLUTION had the greatest influence. Since it involves the thought of man, it is the father of the other revolutions. Its influence explains the astonishing results of scientific research in our age. It has displaced the classical studies and theology in the universities as the chief study.

To us as theologians this revolution or "Aufklaerung" immediately suggests some of its later products: such intellectual phenomena as Modern Criticism and Evolution, and such men as Bauer, Ritschl, Strauss and Darwin. These were of no mean significance, for the end-result was that first in Germany, then in all of Europe, and finally in the later American world the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God was jettisoned. Since Henry Adam's dictum: "A teacher affects eternity" ever proves true, this teaching infiltrated not merely the learned world, but all classes.

It will be worthwhile to inquire into the influences behind this modernism, because a knowledge of them will explain much that we have struggled with in the past one hundred years and that will cause many a future struggle.

The Seventeenth Century was marked by a study of the natural sciences. This science was put on a scientific basis. This is a legitimate study. But what is significant for us is that the method of scientific study in the natural sciences was applied to theology - via philosophy (metaphysics). This meant speculation about the nature of being, the first causes, the nature and existence of God, etc. Though affirming the existence of God and the human soul, this speculation "left no room for the supernatural".

The greatest of the moral philosophers was Immanuel Kant. After long wrestling with the problem of how to base moral duty on the metaphysics of natural science, he arrived at the conclusion: We cannot know

God and prove his existence, yet our moral sense requires us to recognize the transcendental existence of God and likewise the freedom of the will and the immortality of the soul.

All the succeeding philosophers have one common denominator: The effort to be scientific and the resulting substitution of the natural for the supernatural.

To this there were two reactions: Pietism and pure intellectualism. While these were diametrically opposed in one respect, they were one in their contempt for dogma. The Pietists laid an almost exclusive stress on feelings with a corresponding deprecation of doctrine.

The intellectuals, on the other hand, argued from “the simple piety and virtue of the savages”, reported by travelers, that there was no need of a supernatural religion.

The result was the attack on the Bible known as Modern Criticism. These critics sought to destroy the inspiration of the Bible by pointing to alleged diversities in style in a book ascribed to one writer and thus “proving” that the book actually must have been patched together from the writings of several men. Here the essayist showed how the discovery of the Ugaritic tablets completely deflates the critics’ claim to scholarliness, - if that were needed, since their critical method stands pretty well debunked among reputable scholars today. But the havoc they worked in their day was real enough, for they proceeded to reject everything supernatural, including the Virgin Birth, the resurrection and the divinity of Christ. These men gave us what is known as Deism. Their high priest was Voltaire. He did more than any other man to undermine Christianity. There was hardly a writer throughout Europe who was not affected by the writing of Voltaire.

A stout ally of Deism was Free Masonry. It fostered the Spirit of Enlightenment by its pious generalities its emphasis on brotherhood, its use of high-sounding names for God, such as the Grand Architect of the Universe .

In turning to the second REVOLUTION, the political, the essayist first traced its general causes. These were: the spirit of destruction of all existing institutions, the spirit of Enlightenment, the attack of French writers directed against the state, the unequal and miserable cultivation of the land. The specific causes are then listed as the immense debt, the annual deficits, and the complete corruption of the old regime.

Though Napoleon’s soldiers had carried the germs of revolution throughout Europe, the enlightenment in government failed on the Continent, fizzling out in the smaller and later revolutions of the twenties, the thirties, and the forties.

It was these revolutions of the later forties that caused trouble for our congregations in the Middle West. The leaders of these revolutionists were university men. Many of them were settled in Watertown, Wisconsin. They were soft-handed, unfit for real manual labor. “Gott, Tugend, und Unsterblichkeit” was their motto. They were typical Bierphilister.

Many of those Free Thinkers joined the lodges. In this connection the essayist noted that some of our earlier pastors made the mistake of directing this attack against the secrecy element of the lodge, instead of the content of the ritual.

Taking us back to Europe, the essayist showed that the reaction to revolution was a period of unification and growing nationalism. At the same time the great powers of Europe were preparing for the wars of our present generation. The common man was thought of as cannon fodder. Lutheran countries in North Germany had suffered most severely under the campaigns of Napoleon. To many of our fathers, yearning for peace, America offered a haven. Many joined our Synod.

Germany was unified by Bismarck. But the bill of one billion dollars that he handed the French after crushing them proved a boomerang, for this billion dollars was too much money for the Germans. A severe depression followed. Many Germans, including many Lutherans, came to America.

In general, the glamour of war had worn off for our forefathers, and they came to America by the thousands in a great migration that continued until the closing of the frontier in 1892. 1893. To them the freedom in the new homeland meant something: freedom from war, freedom from political enslavement, freedom from poverty, and freedom of religion.

Though America provided the great melting pot which meant freedom, still it brought with it a fundamental change, that of language. The language of Luther was exchanged for English. But Luther’s

language reflects the very character, the very essence of our religion, while the English reflects the spirit of Calvinism. Therefore we have the great responsibility to mold our language to our special use.

Reverting to Europe, the essayist stated that God still had His Israel there. Both among the pastors and the plain people there were many who were solidly confessional. Among these were Bengel, Claus Harms, Hengstenberg, Loehe. The last mentioned first had contact with the Missourians. But in 1853 Loehe and the Missouri Synod parted on the doctrine of the Church and the ministry. This led to the founding of the Iowa Synod. Loehe's legacy to American Lutheranism is his position on Open Questions. This again connects with the union question of today.

Especially significant for us was the conservative leader, Tholuck. Becoming professor at Berlin in 1823, he in 1826 became a member of the theological faculty at Halle, the capital of unbelief and rationalism. There he became the teacher of Adolph Hoenecke, who brought with him a rationalistic family background,

Other conservative scholars were: Kurtz, in the field of church history; Kliefoth in liturgics, church polity, and exegetics; Keil and Delitsch in Old Testament exegesis. At conservative Erlangen were von Hofmann and von Francke. Both were influenced by Schleiermacher. Von Hofmann in turn influenced the old Iowa Synod in that he gave it his teaching of the "Schriftganzen".

But all these men were tainted to some extent by the Enlightenment, the Union, and Schleiermacher's theology. He ignored the ancient creeds and prepared the way for the grounding of religion in experience, die Erfahrungstheologie.

When we speak of another great influence on our forebears, the Evangelical Union put forward in 1817 and enforced in 1829-30, we must bear in mind that it had three sections: The Lutheran and the Reformed with their distinctive doctrines, and a real union party. For our lasting warning, let it be noted that the unionistic leaven soured the whole body.

In spite of protests the Union prevailed. A group of the protesters migrated to America, the Wisconsin Synod receiving a welcome quota of them.

The INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION of the past 150 years has reached its height today in mass production and the scientific research that has surrounded us with the comforts of life. This began at the end of the eighteenth century. It had its origin in the textile business. It was aided by many inventions. The result was the hum of industry; the search for raw materials; the competition for markets; the growth of cities. In this period there was a tremendous increase of population in Europe from 175 million in 1800 to 400 million in 1900. This explains the great emigration out of the Old land to the New. In it too lie the causes of two world wars. As a result of these wars we are today in political and moral bankruptcy. Religion is being called on to help the world out of its mess. Even some Lutherans have adopted this mistaken notion of the church and its function.

Another important change brought by the industrial revolution was the bitter poverty of the masses and their terrible working conditions. Workers' organizations were not legalized until 1825. This improved the workers' condition, but it also led to socialism and communism. The great prophet of both was Karl Marx. His chief work, *das Kapital*, published in 1867, is well-known. But equally important is the pamphlet, the "Communist Manifesto," with its warning: "'Let all the ruling classes tremble.'" Confronted with Communism, some Lutherans again show a mistaken idea of the church and its function, for they believe we must all unite to form a solid front against Communism.

Another child of this revolution was the Social Gospel, that seeks to apply the Christian message to social conditions. Its great prophet was Rauschenbusch. He proclaimed that it is the aim of Christianity to save the social organism.

Scoutism stems from this same period. Its parent, too, is Deism. It is directly descended from Free Masonry. Those Lutherans who refuse to oppose Scoutism either are unacquainted with the doctrines of Holy Writ and the tenets of Scoutism, or they are compromisers.

A final chapter in the historical setting of our Synod is the work of the Mission Societies in Germany. Young candidates from these were the founders of our Synod. That they were the product of the three revolutions is evident from their general purpose: to arouse interest in the idea of a grand union for practical

purposes. -- The chief impetus came from England. But wealthy textile men who gave the English Mission societies their abundant treasures had connections with the textile men in Germany. These also supported the English societies. But then the great Mission Societies were founded in Germany. The speaker listed those of Basel, Leipzig, Berlin, Barmen, St. Krischona, the Langenberger Society.

II. The Historical Development Of The Synod

The essayist connects with the first part of the essay by stating: The miracle of it all is that God preserved His Church in the face of all that Europe was thinking and doing.

Then he stated that he would present only certain angles of the historical development, since this material has been pretty well covered otherwise. A survey of the past one hundred years might yield the following divisions:

1. The beginning, with a discussion of the Mission Societies, the original founders.
2. The first twenty years, 1850-1870, and our relations to other synods.
3. The Synodical Conference, 1872.
4. The '80's, Doctrinal Conflicts.
5. The Joint Synod, 1892.
6. The period of our great teachers, Hoenecke, Pieper, Koehler.
7. The union question.
8. A final chapter on education.

The first twenty years bear a striking resemblance to the fifteen or twenty years just past. In both there are conflicts with unionism. The first twenty years concluded with a house-cleaning and the organization of the Synodical Conference in 1872. We set our house in order. In the last twenty years we have apprehensively watched a loosening of the ties with our sister Synod of Missouri. It is our prayer that they may set their house in order. The roles have been reversed.

While the Saxon immigrants came over as a body, we started from scratch - a very inauspicious way. The first large group of immigrants came in 1839. They had come from Pomerania, Brandenburg, Saxony, and Silesia as a result of the Union being forced upon them by police power. At Buffalo they met other Lutherans under Captain Henry von Rohr, they settled at Freistadt, Kirchhayn, and Lebanon. Those in Lebanon were lineal descendants of the Salzburgers.

At this point the essayist gave a side-light on the life of the day (controversies at Lebanon: over a line-fence, the use of a fiddle by a teacher. The case taken up by Synod.)

The Buffalo Synod was the first to organize Lutheran congregations. Soon some Lutherans appealed to German Mission Societies for help. The appeal to the Langenberger Society brought over the candidates, W. Wrede, Weinmann, and Muehlhaeuser. He organized Trinity, later known as Grace Church, in Milwaukee in 1849.

The three mentioned pastors on December 8, 1849, at Grace Church, took the first steps toward the organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin. The actual organization was completed at Granville on May 27, 1950. Muehlhaeuser became president, Weinmann, secretary, and Wrede, treasurer. Two theological candidates also were present Those men represented 18 congregations. The Missouri Synod had also been established by this time.

The constitution adopted was patterned after that of the New York Ministerium. The provision that "the question of admitting or expelling from membership is exclusively the province of the Ministerium" is seen as a survival from the days of absolutism, in which the clergy and the nobles administered the affairs of the Church.

The confessional stand was given in the old Lutheran form, namely, the Scriptures and the Lutheran Symbols, though in the authentic original manuscript these terms were inked out and "reines Bibelschrentum" or "reines Bibelwort" were inserted. The constitution in general was in the spirit of the

Baseler Christentumsgesellschaft.

At the first meeting in Granville each pastor was urged to take a special interest in the training of the children. By 1880 the Synod's schools numbered 100.

It is significant that Muehlhaeuser went to Boston at this time to solicit funds to acquire church property.

The next ten years saw a great expansion of the Synod, especially along the shores of Lake Michigan. In 1853 John Bading came to Milwaukee. He was called to Calumet. At his ordination he asked Muehlhaeuser to pledge him to the Lutheran confessions. Though Muehlhaeuser first termed the confessions "paper fences", he finally agreed to Bading's request and even preached on the importance of the confessions. Important names of this period are: Jacob Sauer, Philipp Koehler, W. Streisguth, G. Fachtmann, Gottlieb Reim, Philip Sprengling.

As Synod's traveling missionary Fachtmann showed a restless activity. He gathered and organized congregations all the way up to Green Bay, then along the Fox River and Rock River Valleys. Acceptance of a call to La Crosse did not end this missionary activity, for Fachtmann traveled not only the region to the east of La Crosse, but also up the Mississippi as far as the Twin Cities.

Muehlhaeuser was the chief influence on the life of the Synod in its first ten years. He was not a strict confessionalist. He was a child of the Mission Societies. He also maintained close contact with the East. An evidence of this is the annual subsidy made by the Pennsylvania Ministerium for the underpaid pastors of our Synod.

The second ten years open with the election of Bading as-president and closed with the agreement with Missouri that established the confessional status of our Synod.

In 1864 it was resolved to establish the Theological Seminary in Watertown. This was the result of a struggle between the anti-confessionalists in and around Milwaukee and the confessionalists in and around Watertown.

In the same year Bading went to Germany and Russia to collect funds.

In 1865 the Gemeindeblatt appeared under the editorship of Mohldenke and Hoenecke, later under that of Hoenecke alone.

Hoenecke was showing himself able to meet the shafts of the sometimes super-critical Missourians. When in 1867 the General Council would not take a sound confessional stand on altar and pulpit fellowship, Hoenecke led the Synod to withdraw from the Council.

All this while a truly confessional stand was in the making. We owe much to the solidly confessional position of Missouri at that time.

In 1872 in Milwaukee the Synodical Conference came into being. It is instructive to note that this came about, so to speak, "of itself". God had brought about a unity. The synods found themselves in agreement; they then merely acknowledged that agreement. No long discussions or documents worded with super-care were necessary.

1877 brought the state synods strife. Our Synod approved the idea. Closely linked with this was the idea of a general seminary into which all state synods would feed their men.

A rift with Missouri came about when our Synod in June 1878 decided to open its own seminary in Milwaukee. (Previously the Seminar in Watertown had been closed; students were being sent to St. Louis.) Hoenecke and Notz were called as professors.

But the rift was closed by the controversy on election. Walther was accused of Crypto-Calvinism by the Ohioans led by Schmidt, Stellhorn, and Allwardt. These fought for the teaching of "intuitu fidei", i.e. that there is a measure of self-determination on a man's part in his conversion and election. This was not deliberate synergism ("Man collaborates with God") but rather an attempt to rationalize what Scripture does not explain. The element of personal ambition also played in. Wisconsin stoutly defended Walther's scriptural position.

In Chicago in 1882 the Lutheran doctrine of election was upheld. Ohio withdrew. The essayist also sketched the connection of the Norwegians with Synodical Conference. They also dropped out at this time, though not cutting all ties. But in 1920 the faithful minority that refused to go along with unionistic merger of 1917 again came into the Synodical Conference.

The evidence of God's blessing on our stand is found in the growth of the Synod in the next twenty

years.

The essayist then gave short sketches of the great teachers A. Hoenecke, .L. Pieper, and J. P. Koehler. To these may be added Dr. A. Ernst and John Schaller.

In giving a picture of the mission activity of our Synod, the essayist went back to the day of Luther. He showed that in the two hundred years after Luther's death, for various cogent reasons, there was no organized mission activity, although the pupils of Luther from many lands carried the doctrine pure back with them.

Then he briefly portrayed the work of the Mission Societies and that of Fachtmann, who fathered more congregations' in our Synod than any dozen men. He moved on to a brief sketch of our missions today.

The essayist closed with a view of education as carried on among us. He stated that we took our stand against the mechanistic interpretation of life that was in vogue in the years after 1850 ("Man was God"), and consistently held that religion is of the essence in our education. In 1870 Dr. Ernst gave our Northwestern College a new direction, so that our system became a unit. We have continued to build on the broad basis of the classical studies. In closing he warned against the harm that would result from a departure from the way on which we have come.