

THE WARTBURG SYNOD'S POSITION

IN THE GENERAL SYNOD

Church History 373

Prof. Fredrich

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

James Rath

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The Germans of the Wartburg Synod--a little known group, and yet they played a definite role in the development of American Lutheranism. Their history holds interest for us in the Wisconsin Synod, for their story might have been ours, had there been no shift in our confessional stance in the early decades. Parallels exist between the beginnings of the two bodies. As with us, Wartburg was a small German church body. The pastors were evangelical men who knew what it meant to be Lutheran. In their concern for the spread of the Gospel, they did not always focus on the doctrinal implications of their practice.

The Wartburg Synod was a voice within the General Synod for a stronger confessionalism. Yet it must also be noted that her members were not "strict confessionalists;" they saw the attainment of their goals and were satisfied with the position which the General Synod reached.

Trends and ideas illustrating these observations were most evident around the turn of the century. The Synod had become established; it no longer had to justify its organization. In that period also, the differences with the General Synod are most apparent. Once the ULCA was formed, Wartburg's independence of thought is no longer observable.

Wartburg traces her history to the wave of German immigrants reaching the agricultural areas of the Midwest in the

latter half of the nineteenth century. On the religious scene, the General Council was separating itself from the General Synod. That move prompted the creation of the Central Illinois Synod by those preferring the General Synod, for the rest of Illinois sided with the General Council. Among the General Synod loyalists was a group of German-speaking pastors. Because their synod was overwhelmingly English-speaking by this time, a separate conference was formed in 1873. In 1875 these sixteen pastors decided to organize independently, and thus the Wartburg Synod came into being.¹

At the outset their interest was primarily the maintenance of the German work. Their purpose was put into writing at the second convention in 1877.

Eine deutsche Synode meinten unser Viele haben zu müssen, beides zur Förderung unserer Wirksamkeit und Freudigkeit im Dienste der Kirche, wie auch noch besonders im Interesse unserer Gemeinden und unserer ganzen deutschen Sache in der General-synode.²

The German emphasis continued throughout the early decades. In those ensuing years the little synod did experience growth. Its source of additional pastors was largely the Breklum institute of Christian Jensen in Schleswig-Holstein. While most German synods at the time were staunchly conservative and involved with Missouri, Jensen's men represented a milder type of Lutheranism.³ Following his tendencies they had a pietistic leaning and a strong interest in evangelism. Jensen felt there was a lack of evangelistic interest among the

strict doctrinal Lutheran bodies, and thus he directed his students to this faction of the General Synod. Jensen's son, on a visit to America, quoted from his father's writings:

Es wurde gesagt, dass die Generalsynode tütiger als jede andre lutherische Synode dieses Landes sei. Sie habe den innigsten Wunsch, das Reich Gottes auf Erden zu bauen: Missionare zu den Heiden zu senden und Pastoren auszubilden und Kirchen zu bauen für die Einwanderer durch ihre verschiedenen Behörden, und dass man gerade in dieser Körperschaft einen wahren evangelischen Geist fände. Dies entschied die Frage, wohin die Pastoren, ausgebildet in unserm Institut, gehen sollten."

So from the beginning the Wartburg Synod did not intend to be like the Synodical Conference. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Occasional negative references to Missouri's "separatistic" tendencies dot the early writings. A few of the pastors were ex-Missourians who had been removed from their congregations;⁵ a dislike was bound to remain. Rev. J. D. Severinghaus, an early president, recalled the synod's beginnings with praise for her larger affiliation.

The General Synod both as to her confessional standards as well as to her historical development is above reproach; that we Germans have no occasion to be dissatisfied with the General Synod.

Still, Wartburg positions were not identical with the doctrine and practices of the General Synod. Attribute it to their more recent immigration, the influence of their neighboring synods, or the generally stricter tendencies of the Midwest, but the difference is clear: Wartburg was ahead of the General Synod as a whole in its confessional stance.

Eventually it would catch up, but near the end of the

1900's, the General Synod lacked many elements of a Lutheran basis. Evidence of that fact is abundant in the subscription (or lack of it) to the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. The General Synod's constitution pledged faithfulness to "the Augsburg Confession as a correct exhibition of the fundamental doctrines of the divine Word."⁷ Not only were the other symbolical writings omitted, but there was the question of the extent of "fundamental doctrines."

General Synod members didn't want more. They desired a broad base, in hopes of encompassing more within their fold. Adopting additional creeds would not accomplish this end.

Concluded one theologian:

It stands true without the possibility of successful contradiction that the Book of Concord has not been an instrument of concord in the Lutheran Church in America.

Indeed, the body couldn't adopt a more limited confessional basis because there was not agreement in its midst. Individuals had absolute liberty as to what they could believe and still belong to and act for the General Synod.

No man is praised or blamed for his views. But as there is not a harmony of views, it would be unwise on the part of a majority to force others to submit in a matter so vital (adoption of the Formula of Concord).

Lack of unanimity did not bother these men. They pointed to history for justification. "The Lutheran theologians after the death of Luther, and indeed before, did not agree in all points, as all students of history know, and that cannot be

expected now."¹⁰ Admittedly, some opponents might point out that the confessions agree with Scripture and the Augsburg Confession, so they should not withhold their acceptance.

That argument was countered in this manner:

We would reply to our logicians, that for the same reason we might as well subscribe to every system of theology that is in harmony with and a true explanation of its teachings, including Jacobs, Valentine, Krauth and a thousand others, until making of confessional books there would be no end.

Actually, that was not the only reason. The doctrine expressed therein did not find universal acceptance within the General Synod. Regarding the Formula of Concord, the admission is not hidden:

The number of those who find it to be the expression of their personal faith, in the sense in which it may be supposed to have expressed the theological convictions of those who composed it, is very small indeed.¹²

Not surprisingly such attitudes toward confessional norms include a broad, unscriptural fellowship practice. Some restraints there must be, where deviation from orthodoxy involved fundamental errors, but

over against the errors of the Reformed churches, which leaves us Christ and his redemptive work for the salvation of sinners our General Synod is lenient--not endorsing or approving.¹³

The claim was made that Bible passages urging separation from false teachers did not apply to those who merely expressed views not soundly Lutheran. A variety of theological positions really posed no problem since that had Scriptural

precedents, at least as some read Scripture. They saw distinctly different theological movements in Peter, Paul, and John.¹⁴ To reassure any doubting souls, the claim was made that a lack of unity existed also in the more rigorous synods, but it was just concealed.

Operating within that type of an affiliation, it is no wonder that the Wartburg Synod appeared to be a strict body. The Germans did hold a more confessional stance. They expressed their differences and strove to influence the position of the larger body. Much of their effort was by example-- they understood that as the American way. One had to be more tolerant and work at educating others, perhaps even for a generation, rather than excommunicate them or break fellowship, they felt.

In contrast to the aforementioned position of the General Synod, the Wartburg men "insisted on the recognition of the whole 'Book of Concord,'"¹⁵ In an effort to maintain standards, candidates for the ministry coming from non-Lutheran bodies were required to take a colloquy.

Adherence to the Confessions led the Wartburg Synod to support and adopt the Galesburg Rule on pulpit and altar fellowship. Its principles long their conviction, they acted officially on the matter in 1906. They saw such practice necessary for a unified church faithful to God's Word. There was something inconsistent, for instance, when some communicants believed in the Real Presence while others flatly

rejected it. Not all participants in the General Synod agreed. At the 1909 national convention, the East Pennsylvania Synod filed a protest against Wartburg's action. Consideration of the motion was referred to a committee. Although the adoption of the Galesburg Rule was not outrightly condemned, the position of the majority was clear. The resolution considered

cites an action of the Wartburg Synod which would exclude other than Lutheran ministers from its pulpits and other than Lutherans from participation in the Holy Communion at its altars...

Since examples of iron-clad enforcement were not evident, "we deem no further action advisable than to call attention to these facts..." but they did counsel

all such questions are more properly settled by remanding them to the wisdom of pastors and church councils than by making them the subject of Synodical legislation.

As long as they didn't ask other synods to accept their judgment and affirm their action, no steps would be taken against them. An additional resolution was offered as a response.

Resolved, That the General Synod, while allowing all congregations and individuals connected with it the fullest Christian liberty, does not approve of Synodical enactments which in any way narrow its confessional basis or abridge inter-Synodical fellowship and transfers.

Further study would be conducted by the Committee on Common Service before the next convention.

A veteran pastor and synod president later looked back upon such differences of opinion and recognized the problems

the synod faced.

It cannot be denied on the part of our English speaking brethren that they are in danger of yielding to doctrinal and practical errors common to the denominations, and approving them. Following the separation of 1866 it was the custom of the majority of the pastors of the General Synod to fellowship with the Methodist brethren. This attitude we deprecated. And the fear was expressed that such communion would be a serious hindrance to unity on the part of the German Synod with the General body.

Also arousing attention in the General Synod was Wartburg's stand on secret societies. The latter's pastors could not reconcile membership in a lodge with Christianity. The Church offered much more than any lodge possibly could. Thus church members were discouraged from joining or continuing in secret societies. They were emphatic that "Wenigstens die Deutschen in der Generalsynode können nicht 'logenfreundlich' genannt werden."¹⁹ They did not, however, absolutely exclude lodge members from the congregations. For clergy, the rule read "that pastors who are members of the said Synod shall not hold membership in secret societies,"²⁰ although there is uncertainty whether the policy was actually in writing.

The East Pennsylvania Synod opposed also that requirement at the 1909 meeting. The General Synod had not yet established a position on lodges, so the requirement was allowed. "The resolution was referred to the District Synods to take such action as they deemed best."²¹ The Committee on Common Service received this matter also. The Germans were sure their

position would prevail.

Wir sind Überzeugt, dass uns die Generalsynode wegen unsern Sonderstellung in diesen Fragen offiziell weder tadeln kann noch wird.²²

Following that 1911 General Synod meeting, the Wartburg convention could express its joy that the controverted points had been decided in their favor.

Matters did seem to be flowing in their desired direction. Although at first largely ignored because of their language limitations, the opinions of the Wartburgers were heard and heeded. At their 1905 convention, the delegates to the recent General Synod reported:

Wir deutschen Delegaten fanden ein herzliches Entgegenkommen sowohl vonseiten des Präsidiums, als auch der Glieder der General-Synode. Es wurde von verschiedenen Rednern mehrfach betont, dass sie die höchste Achtung hatten vor der Arbeit der deutschen Synoden innerhalb der General-Synode.²³

Twenty years later their historian concluded, "Not only is the counsel of Wartburg valued, but it is sought. Accordingly the mission of the Wartburg Synod to be a leaven in the English lump is fulfilled."²⁴

Why such optimism? The General Synod had indeed strengthened its confessional position. At York in 1899 the general invitation to members of all churches to partake of ministerial acts was removed. In 1901, the Des Moines convention proposed explanatory statements on the constitution's doctrinal position. These denied a difference between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines in the Augsburg Confession. At

the conventions of 1909-1913, the General Synod greatly firmed up its doctrinal position, including the acknowledgement of the Bible as God's Word and the recognition of the entire Book of Concord. After the major steps of the 1909 Richmond meeting, Wartburg responded joyously.

Erfreulich für uns Deutsche ist es, dass sich das konfessionelle Bewusstsein der Generalsynode immer mehr klärt und in der Richtung eines gesunden Luthertums entwickelt. Die von Dr. Keyser unterbreitete ausführliche Erklärung des Bekenntnisstandpunktes der Generalsynode, welche nach kurzer Debatte mit überwältigender Stimmenmehrheit angenommen wurde, muss jeden vorurteilslosen Beurteiler davon überzeugen, dass unsere Synode in keinem Stück von der Lehre der ev. luth. Kirche abweicht. ²⁵

Following 1913 Wartburg felt the battle was over: their goals had been accomplished. From then on, there is little evidence that they doubted or criticized the General Synod's doctrine. It had reached the position they themselves held.

Speaking of the human factors, did Wartburg influence that progress? Were they the "leaven in the English lump," as they described themselves? From the records at hand, they definitely were involved in the process. Of course, the persuasion of the General Council must not be forgotten. The Wartburg Synod worked from within, maintaining its own stronger position and practices. By the resulting interaction, the General Synod had to reconsider its views on the Confessions, pulpit and altar fellowship, and lodges. Yet I do not detect a decisive, active leadership role by the Wartburg Synod. Its men did not deliver stirring, persuasive addresses at

General Synod conventions. Nor did they publish a wealth of articles or tracts to prod the larger body to action. Rather they followed the educational process, praying their example and witness would gradually be followed. And of course, they surely voted their sentiments on the matters. Finally, the outcome cannot be denied: the General Synod became more of a Bible-based, Lutheran church body.

Unfortunately there is also a negative side of the story, especially from a standpoint such as ours. The Wartburg Synod did not follow through to a wholly confessional position. Probably influenced by those with whom it was in fellowship, the synod remained in the camp of "mild Lutheranism." Thus we find instances of laxity or indifference on the part of Wartburg congregations.

Part of it was by intent. The Wartburg Synod pastors wanted to avoid what they termed "orthodoxism." There was a definite opposition to Missouri's rigid doctrine and practice. Many of the pastors lacked pre-theological training and had not developed a knack for in-depth criticism. Thus, for example, they remained on the sidelines when the election controversy was burning on all sides of them. Those men who formed opinions left the synod to affiliate with whichever side their views supported.²⁶ But the group as a whole tried to remain irenic toward the opposing doctrinal positions.

This irenicism showed up in fellowship practices. Wartburg was pledged to the Akron-Galesburg Rule. One can find

fault with the Rule because it put exceptions into its provisions. Soon the attention on the exceptions predominates.

The assertion is then made, as it was in Wartburg:

Die Regel: "lutherische Kanzeln für lutherische Prediger und luth. Altäre für lutherische Kommunikanten," will nicht so ausgelegt und verstanden sein, als ob ein lutherischen Prediger unter Umständen nicht mal eine Kanzel anderer Denominationen betreten dürfe.²⁷

To support his opinion the writer cited personal cases, including his preaching for a Methodist congregation during its vacancy. His comment, "und die Leute waren uns sehr dankbar"²⁸ seems to be the justification! Such attitudes lead to the violation of principles. Indeed the statement was made, "Schliesslich hat sie (the Galesburg Rule) in der Praxis nicht viel Bedeutung."²⁹

One of Wartburg's most prominent scholars, J.L. Neve, authored a series of articles on church fellowship for the synodical paper.³⁰ Judging by an accompanying editorial, he was portraying the prevailing opinion. First he explored passages oft cited against unionism (Ro 16:17, Tt 3:10, II Cor 6:17,18, Mt 7:15-20). He drew the conclusion that they apply only to sects which completely deny the basics of Christianity. Romans 16:17 "nicht beweist, wenigstens nicht zwingend beweist"³¹ that fellowship with non-Lutherans is wrong. Likewise on Tt 3:10: "In dieser Stelle liegt keine Einschränkung auf den kirchlichen Verkehr."³² How can we remain separate from others such as Moody, Neve reasons, --look

at their good fruits (they produce civic righteousness). Yet in the end, he still supports the limitations on fellowship set forth in the Galesburg Rule. His basis is argumentation from reason (common worship gives the impression of common faith) plus practical considerations (a pastor should be concerned his members don't think they can go anywhere and everywhere). But the Biblical foundation was forfeited.

Once that has been lost, the door is opened to a multitude of errors. Splits within Lutheranism were censured, but not because one part taught incorrectly.

Wenn alle die Gemeindchen, die hin und wieder in grosser Anzahl nahe beisammen sind und von Pastoren verschiedener Synoden bedient werden, sich würden von einem Pastor bedienen lassen, dann wäre dem viel beklagten Predigermangel mit einem Schlage abgeholfen, und es stände uns dann eine bedeutende Zahl Prediger für Missionsarbeit zur Verfügung.³³

Thus the deviations of others in the General Synod could be tolerated.

These German Lutheran pastors accepted the English Lutheran pastors as brethren in Christ Jesus and as co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord. They were aware of differences. They knew that they could not accept the attitude and opinion of their English brethren, but they knew also that that the Church of Jesus Christ and the Lutheran Church as such has a place in it for all men who would desire to be members of the body of the eternal Christ.³⁴

In fact it was seen as the best course of action. "A synod of the importance of the General Synod and developing in the direction indicated deserves to be strengthened instead of weakened by withdrawal."³⁵

Yes, the Wartburg Synod was pleased with its membership

in the General Synod. Already in 1901, we note this commendation: "Unsre Wartburg-Synode genießt alle Segnungen der Zuhörigkeit zu einem solchen Körper wie die Generalsynode."³⁶ After that body had made the improvements discussed earlier, the Wartburg men were especially pleased. They welcomed the formation of the ULCA and hoped more would enter the union. "Since the merger of the three great bodies...a healthy Lutheran spirit prevails throughout the United Lutheran Church,"³⁷ maintained the 1925 anniversary booklet. Wartburg and ULCA were portrayed as one in spirit and belief.

The picture is probably true. Therein lies the disappointing feature of Wartburg. Although the synod had exerted a positive influence in its association with the General Synod, it also was partaker of the weaknesses of that body. The little group of Germans seemed to know what being Lutheran meant, but they were unable or unwilling to put it into full practice. Where is Wartburg today? Absorbed into the Lutheran Church in America, its congregations have become full participants in the attitudes and trends of that body.

The history of the Wartburg Synod holds a lesson for us. It illustrates the failures of "mild Lutheranism" and the results which follow when one does not conform both doctrine and practice entirely to God's inerrant Word. May that lesson never be forgotten among us!

ENDNOTES

1. Wm. Schuelzke, The Golden Book of the Wartburg Synod (Burlington, Iowa: The Lutheran Literary Board, 1925), p.9.
2. Verhandlungen der zweiten Versammlung der Deutschen Wartburg-Synode der Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche (Chicago: Severinghaus & Co., 1877), p. 5. (Hereafter convention proceedings will be indicated in a shorter form.)
3. Willard Allbeck, "Christian Jensen and the Germans of the General Synod," Lutheran Church Quarterly, XIII (July, 1940), p. 269.
4. Quoted by B. Garten, "Ein grosser Tag für Breklum," Lutherische Zionsbote, XI (Juni 17, 1907), p. 195.
5. ULCA Committee on History, Story of the Midwest Synod (n.p., 1950?), p. 19.
6. Verhandlungen...1888, p. 4.
7. J.L. Neve, "Formulation of General Synod's Confessional Basis," The Lutheran Quarterly, XLI (January, 1911), p.125.
8. J.W. Richard, The Confessional History of the Lutheran Church (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1909), p. 617.
9. J. Singmaster, "The Confessional History of the Lutheran Church," The Lutheran Quarterly XL (April, 1910), p. 170.
10. J.M. Reimensnyder, "Relation of the General Synod to the Lutheran Church," The Lutheran Quarterly XXXIX (October, 1909), p. 135.
11. John Crigler, "The General Synod and the Book of Concord," The Lutheran Quarterly, XXXIX (October, 1909), p. 580.
12. Richard, op. cit., p. 505.
13. J.L. Neve, "Thoughts on Confessional Questions," The Lutheran Quarterly, XL (January, 1910), p. 15.
14. T.F. Dornblaser, "The Desirability and Possibility of a United Lutheran in America," The Lutheran Quarterly, XLI (April, 1911), p. 233.
15. Walter Kaitschuk, History of the Wartburg Synod (Burlington, Iowa: Lutheran Literary Board, 1940), p. 16.

16. Proceedings of the Forty-fourth Convention of the General Synod (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1909), p. 127.
17. Ibid., p. 128.
18. Schuelzke, op. cit., p. 19.
19. "Editorielle," Lutherische Zionsbote, X (June 4, 1906), p. 184.
20. General Synod Proceedings, 1909, p. 126.
21. William Brenner, "Why Lutheran Ministers Should Not Officiate at Secret Society Funerals," The Lutheran Church Review, XXXII (January, 1913), p. 106.
22. Verhandlungen...1909, p. 22.
23. Verhandlungen...1905, p. 27.
24. Schuelzke, loc. cit.,
25. Verhandlungen...1909, loc. cit.
26. J.L. Neve, "A Review of the German Educational Work of the German Synods of the General Synod," appendix to Kaitschuk, History of the Wartburg Synod, p. 76.
27. "Editorielle," Lutherische Zionsbote, X (December 3, 1906), p. 393.
28. Ibid.
29. "Editorielle," Lutherische Zionsbote, X (June 4, 1906), p. 185.
30. J.L. Neve, "Die Kanzelgemeinschaftfrage und der Schriftbeweis," Lutherische Zionsbote, XXII (October 21-December 16, 1918).
31. Ibid., p. 341.
32. Ibid., p. 327.
33. Verhandlungen...1903, p. 10.
34. Kaitschuk, loc. cit.
35. Neve, "...Confessional Questions," p. 28.
36. Verhandlungen...1901, p. 25.
37. Schuelzke, op. cit., p. 21.

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