

THEODORE GRAEBNER: BELLWETHER OF CHANGES IN THE MISSOURI SYNOD

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Writing in 1977 about the break between the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods, Edward Fredrich remarked on the “startling changes” that occurred in Missouri between 1931—the year Franz Pieper died—and the adoption of the 1938 Union Resolutions. Commendable features of Missouri’s “transformation” during that time—vigorous outreach in the United States and mission expansion overseas, enthusiastic evangelism efforts and pioneering radio broadcasts—were overshadowed by its willingness to enter doctrinal discussions with the recently-formed American Lutheran Church. These changes caused Wisconsin to speak out in admonition and protest beginning in 1939, and ultimately led to Wisconsin’s declaration of the suspension of church fellowship with Missouri in 1961.¹

Writing in the same decade, Missouri spokesman Edward Busch said that “one of the popular parsonage-parlor games” of the 1970s was “to debate when the changes in the Missouri Synod began.” There was “a certain challenge of one-ups-man-ship,” Busch recalled, “to be able to point to a certain landmark and say, ‘Here was the turning point. Here was the watershed. After this, Missouri would never be the same.’”²

Busch offered several plausible Missouri turning points, over a longer time span than Fredrich suggested:

- the initial cooperation among Lutherans to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Reformation in 1917-18;
- the hastening of the process of Americanization during and after World War I, as Lutherans made the transition from German to English;
- the formation of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau in 1914, followed by publication of *The American Lutheran*, beginning in 1918, as a “loyal opposition voice” in Missouri;
- the challenge Dr. Adolph Brux made to Missouri’s traditional understanding of Romans 16:17-18 and its longstanding position on church fellowship;

¹Edward C. Fredrich, “The Great Debate with Missouri,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 74 (April 1977): 157.

²Edward E. Busch, “Another Turning Point,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 2 (April 1975): 75-76.

- the “Statement of the 44” in 1945, resulting in vindication of the Brux position on fellowship in Missouri’s 1967 statement “The Theology of Fellowship.”

Busch himself made a case for yet another turning point: January 20, 1941, date of the first All-Lutheran Conference in Columbus, Ohio, which E. Clifford Nelson regarded as a historic first because it “marked the first time in history that the Missouri Synod had joined in prayer with [National Council] Lutherans.”³ That conference, which Wisconsin Synod representatives did not attend, paved the way for further intersynodical cooperation—although ostensibly limited to “externals” only—during World War II, and marked the beginning of the end, as Busch put it, of “Missouri’s isolation.”⁴

Remarkable it was that by 1975, Missouri writers so openly acknowledged that changes had indeed occurred in their church body. President Behnken, for one, remained convinced that Missouri had not changed, an assertion he voiced in the 1950s⁵ and repeated following Wisconsin’s 1961 declaration.⁶

Another way to gauge Missouri change is to focus not on particular showdown dates or events but to chart the transformation of a single uniquely influential synod leader. During the second quarter of the 20th century, the most reliable bellwether of changes in the teaching, practice, and culture of the Missouri Synod was the shift of Theodore Graebner.

“The Lord blessed him with a good mind”

Grandson of a Loehe man sent to Michigan’s Saginaw Valley, son of a professor at Wisconsin’s Northwestern College and later at Concordia Seminary, Graebner was born in Watertown, Wisconsin, on November 23, 1876, and completed his theological education in St. Louis before his twenty-first birthday.⁷ After serving 16 years as a college instructor, editor, and pastor, Graebner was called back to Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, to serve as editor of *Der Lutheraner* and department editor for *Lehre und Wehre* and the synod’s preaching journal *Magazin fuer ev.-luth. Homiletik*. While continuing to write for

³E. Clifford Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America, 1914-1970* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 130.

⁴Busch, “Another Turning Point,” 81.

⁵John W. Behnken to “Taffy” (W.F. Klindwirth), August 19, 1955; in John W. Behnken papers, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis, Box 15.

⁶John W. Behnken, “Reaction to Wisconsin Synod Resolutions,” *The Lutheran Witness* 80 (September 19, 1960): 460.

⁷Jerrald Kort Pfabe, “Theodore Graebner: Apologist for Missouri Synod Lutheranism” (Ph.D. diss., St. Louis University, 1972), 19.

these German publications, Graebner soon concentrated on English readers. In 1914 he became co-editor, with Martin Sommer, of *The Lutheran Witness*, a position both men held until 1949. During their 35-year tenure, the *Witness* grew from having a list of 6,500 subscribers to becoming the second largest Protestant church paper in the United States.⁸

Besides editing the *Witness* and maintaining a growing classroom load, Graebner edited the *Bible-Student Quarterly*, contributed to the *Student Concordia Cyclopedia*, *Concordia Theological Monthly*, *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, *Walther League Messenger*, and Valparaiso University's campus publication the *Cresset*. He wrote hundreds of other articles, books, book reviews, tracts, and pamphlets, and was also a featured writer in *The American Lutheran*.⁹

Graebner showed signs of brilliance already as a young boy, having mastered Latin by age 11.¹⁰ He has been described as "very individualistic and idiosyncratic,"¹¹ a "complex person," and "one of the most brilliant men the Missouri Synod ever produced." He pursued no academic degrees beyond his seminary education, and in a 1927 letter "confessed intense misgivings regarding the entire matter of university degrees or their equivalent." Among the concerns against this practice was that professors receiving graduate degrees from non-Missouri Synod schools would "certainly in the end gather disciples about them and thus make Modernism an issue also in the Missouri Synod."¹²

But Graebner zealously educated himself, reading "widely and extensively in almost every field of human endeavor." He maintained lifelong, compulsive reading habits on many subjects and was known to always carry a pair of scissors in his coat pocket to snip articles for further reference.¹³ He came to amass an overall familiarity with church history, world literature, the fine arts, the sciences, and philosophy, in addition to religion.¹⁴

His meticulously organized, eclectic collection of papers, notes, articles, and voluminous correspondence fill 160 boxes at Concordia's Historical Institute in St. Louis. His writings have provided research

⁸Paul M. Bretscher, "Theodore Conrad Graebner, 1876-1950," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 22 (January 1951): 1-4.

⁹Bretscher, "Theodore Conrad Graebner, 1876-1950," 4.

¹⁰Pfabe, "Theodore Graebner," 29.

¹¹Martin E. Marty to Mark Braun, March 4, 1996.

¹²Theodore Graebner to Martin Graebner, December 1927; Theodore Graebner papers, CHI, Box 24.

¹³Pfabe, "Theodore Graebner," 30-32.

¹⁴Bretscher, "Theodore Conrad Graebner, 1876-1950," 6.

material for generations of church historians to come, not only on his career and the fortunes of the Missouri Synod but on the wider picture of American Lutherans and social and doctrinal change.¹⁵

Graebner eagerly offered advice to present and future pastors. In his 1925 book, *The Pastor as Student and Literary Worker*; he prescribed an aggressive regimen of reading, personal study, and writing. The young preacher “does not, as a rule, look upon the minister’s library and study as a powerhouse.” Scholarship appears at best to be a luxury but more often an impediment to being a capable pastor. He fears being considered a “bookworm” by church members and neighboring pastors, and learning seems “almost synonymous with impractical and futile bookishness,” a “helplessness” and “old-fogeyism.” In fact, Graebner argued, pastors were ten times more likely to fail from fault of character than from too much study: “The number of ministerial failures is rare among those who read their Greek [New] Testament.”¹⁶

Young pastors should “read every day fifteen minutes in the Greek Testament and an hour in the great teachers of our Church.” During the first five years of ministry “even the busy preacher will find time to do this”—not casual reading but “tense and undistracted reading, reading with fountain pen in hand and with index and commonplace books at one’s elbow.” But he urged preachers also to read “light literature,” calling it “the spices and condiments” that “add variety and zest to our food.” He advised preachers to clip articles from a range of popular publications, gather them according to subject and lay them away in a place by themselves. When reading the daily newspaper, one should clip useful items and paste them into notebooks devoted to that purpose. “Every pastor is to a certain extent a literary worker.” In the early years of ministry there is “great opportunity for study while the demands for literary expression are few and rarely insistent.” A young pastor’s leisure time “should be devoted to gathering facts, facts, and more facts.” As “the years roll on, you will find less and less time for study” and “more and more opportunity for work.” The more a pastor has developed a “reservoir” of information and expression during youth, the more it can be tapped for use during later, busier years.¹⁷

With not a hint of false modesty, Graebner compared his work load and literary output to that of his Concordia colleagues. He wrote to a fellow professor in 1928, “I think you realize—and I am now touching on a

¹⁵Pfabe, “Theodore Graebner,” 256-57.

¹⁶Theodore Graebner, *The Pastor as Student and Literary Worker* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1925), 17.

¹⁷Theodore Graebner, *The Pastor as Student and Literary Worker*, 57, 81, 91, 101, 123-24, 180.

delicate subject—that some of our colleagues do not work so very hard.” Many of his colleagues did little or no synodical work, he charged, and had “almost zero” contact with the synod’s pastors and leaders. He had difficulty getting them even to read manuscripts for publication. By contrast, “even with the help of a full-time secretary I am unable to do my work properly.” Graebner claimed that in one two-year period he advised 700 pastors—one-fourth of the active Missouri Synod clergy roster.¹⁸

Graebner’s son Alex believed his father was able to produce so much work because “the Lord blessed him with a good mind” but also because “he disciplined himself.” After years of experience “he was able to lay out his source materials before himself, and dictate a first and final draft” immediately to his secretary. The “key to his great success” was “to get organized, and to do everything just once.”¹⁹

He was a powerful proponent of the synod’s transition to English, “one of the first of our great teachers to speak a truly American English free from the ponderous latinizations.”²⁰ Those who remembered World War I and its attendant difficulties for some Missouri congregations also remembered his incisive editorials that congregations convert as quickly as feasible into English without jeopardizing the cause of the Church.²¹ Graebner wrote in 1915, “To say that our Gospel ‘has no future’ when proclaimed in this, that, or the other language”—meaning in English—“is either to deny that our Gospel is the Gospel of Christ and of His apostles” or to “deny that the Gospel of Christ is a power of salvation unto every creature.” Lutheranism did not need to fear a language problem. “When Lutheranism *ceased to be Lutheran*, it failed.”²²

In his many editorials and longer essays he “revealed his concern with current issues” and had “little use for irrelevant studies or research.” He wrote “with incomparable clarity and a penetrating mind,” displaying “a spirited and witty writing style with a touch of humor notably absent in previous Missouri Synod literature,” which helped boost the popularity of *The Witness*. But as a speaker he received mixed evaluations; some remembered him as “a poor preacher and a lackluster lecturer” while others recalled how he “often electrified those who heard him present his views.”²³

¹⁸Theodore Graebner to J[ohn] H.C. Fritz, August 3, 1928; Graebner papers, Box 24.

¹⁹Alex Graebner, “A Brief Commemorative Profile of Theodore Graebner, The Professional Churchman,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 44 (February 1971): 13-14.

²⁰O. A. Geiseman, “While It Is Day: Our Synod’s Debt,” *The American Lutheran* 34 (January 1951): 5.

²¹Bretscher, “Theodore Conrad Graebner,” 7.

²²[Theodore] G[raebner], “English Lutheranism,” *The Lutheran Witness* 34 (June 15, 1915): 180.

²³Pfabe, “Theodore Graebner,” 31-32; Bretscher, “Theodore Conrad Graebner,” 4.

One later observer concluded that as author, professor, and editor, “the influence exerted by Theodore Graebner cannot easily be exaggerated.” Although “Lutheran Hour” speaker Walter A. Maier may have been better known outside Lutheran circles, within the Missouri Synod “Graebner was probably the most powerful figure of his generation.”²⁴ Another said Graebner “was probably as well acquainted with the leaders of all the Lutheran bodies in our country and in Europe as any other member of the Lutheran Church.”²⁵

Missouri’s *Magisterium*

Richard John Neuhaus, who grew up in the Missouri Synod in the 1940s, recalled knowing that the Roman Catholic Church and the LCMS each had a “Magisterium,” though he was unaware of the existence of that term at the time. “When it came to settling a question in dispute, [Catholics] had the pope—and we had the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. It was perfectly natural to ask the question, ‘What’s our position on this or that?’” and “the answer was commonly given by reference to an article in the synod’s official publication, *The Lutheran Witness*, usually written, or so it seemed, by Dr. Theodore Graebner.”²⁶ He “wielded the Sword of the Word” more than any other teacher in the church and “lustily swung the club of Christian apologetics in fearless battle against modernism, higher criticism and rationalist liberalism in the church.”²⁷

Graebner gloried in the conservative position to which the Missouri Synod confidently gave voice. Writing for the dedication of Concordia’s new seminary plant in suburban St. Louis in 1926, Graebner said that “conservative, loyal, confessional Lutheranism might be” only “a shallow stream, ankle-deep,” were it not for Missouri. “We stood isolated among the denominations,” with little prospect for growth amid “such a league of hostile forces.” Yet as the Synod dedicated what had become the largest Protestant seminary in North America, “we rejoice as we observe the phenomenal growth, the inner harmony, the vast expansion of territory which are so evident as we survey the organization of which we are members.” Eight decades after Missouri’s founding, “conservative Lutheranism—Synodical

²⁴Ralph Moellering, “The Missouri Synod and Social Problems: A Theological and Sociological Analysis of the Reaction to Tensions, War, and Race Relations from 1917 to 1941,” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 465.

²⁵O. A. Geiseman, “While It Is Day: Many Facets,” *The American Lutheran* 34 (January 1951): 5.

²⁶Richard John Neuhaus, “How I Became the Catholic I Was,” *First Things* 122 (April 2002): 15.

²⁷Geiseman, “Our Synod’s Debt,” 5.

Conference, 'Missouri' Lutheranism—is a mighty stream which touches the shores of three continents," and "its leaves are for medicine and its fruit for meat."²⁸

Graebner judged the Reformed churches after World War I to be "rapidly completing their descent through the various stages of false doctrine, skepticism, and evolutionistic theology to the rankest kind of indifferentism." Insistence on doctrine was "scorned as proof of un-American spirit" and there was "an almost fanatical impatience with denominational distinctions."²⁹ He considered theological modernism "a cirrhosis on the body of Christian belief."³⁰ The "sheep's clothing" worn by false prophets could manifest itself in "an extraordinary show of holiness" and "a show of great reverence for the Bible," but "false prophets are wolves that destroy souls." The "sheep's clothing" of modernists consisted "in the use of the old religious phrases," but invested with "an entirely different meaning."³¹ Conservative Lutherans must "continue to turn a deaf ear to the tempters who would invite us to join the ranks of the 'liberal,' 'tolerant' churches."³²

The contention of some Protestants that unity did not demand complete agreement in doctrine but permitted liberty in "non-essentials" was intolerable to Graebner. "Who is the man who dares to say that any portion of revealed truth may be regarded as unessential when doctrinal harmony is at issue?" Where the word of God is silent, there is "latitude and freedom of action," but "there is no liberty in matters of Christian doctrine and divinely established principle." Yielding on any point of doctrine "denies the Truth, which is indivisible."³³

Graebner called unionism "a diseased condition of the Church" and a "fatal disease" which ends in "spiritual tuberculosis, or a state of coma, the precursor of death."³⁴ He likened unionism to the ringing of a tree, eventually killing it.³⁵ Unionism inevitably

²⁸Theodore Graebner, *Concordia Seminary: Its History, Architecture, and Symbolism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1926), 9-11.

²⁹[Theodore] G[raebner], "Are We Willing to Bear Reproach for Christ?" *The Lutheran Witness* 38 (April 15, 1919): 114.

³⁰[Theodore] G[raebner], "New Theology and Higher Criticism, I," *The Lutheran Witness* 41 (September 12, 1922): 295.

³¹[Theodore] G[raebner], "Sheep's Clothing of the Modernists," *The Lutheran Witness* 42 (December 4, 1923): 391.

³²[Theodore] G[raebner], "Lutherans Are Sometimes Told That Their Church Is Not Liberal Enough," *The Lutheran Witness* 34 (October 19, 1915): 329.

³³[Theodore] G[raebner], "In Non-Essentials, Liberty," *The Lutheran Witness* 37 (February 18, 1918): 57.

³⁴[Theodore] G[raebner], "Unionism," *The Lutheran Witness* 37 (April 2, 1918): 98.

³⁵[Theodore] G[raebner], "Two Ways to Kill a Tree," *The Lutheran Witness* 37 (July 23, 1918): 234.

produced doctrinal indifference and led to the loss of orthodoxy. When Christians not agreed in doctrine nonetheless worshiped and worked together, they were simply ignoring their differences, leading to the establishment of a watered-down theology. Eventually doctrinal preaching would decay and one teaching after another would be eliminated.³⁶ Unionism was “essentially hypocritical,” involving “an intellectual dishonesty.” Being asked to say a “tactful prayer” in a public situation typically meant “a prayer that would not offend either party, a prayer that would evade one doctrine or another, a prayer that would proclaim a unity that did not exist.”³⁷ Because churches “have lost their faith in the Bible as the inerrant Word of God, and because of the doubts and uncertainties which rule their thoughts, their pastors and members are able to fraternize with those who teach diametrically opposite of their own doctrine.”³⁸

Graebner found more to like in Fundamentalist Protestant churches, but still he catalogued their deficiencies. Fundamentalists emphasized agreement in certain elemental teachings—the inspiration of Scripture, the six-day creation, the two natures of Christ and his substitutionary atonement—while overlooking other clear scriptural teachings on the sacraments and the office of the ministry. “Once admit that we are free to pick and choose among the teachings of Scripture, and you are different from the Modernist only in degree, so far as your attitude toward the Scripture is concerned. For this reason, we do not accept the designation ‘Fundamentalist.’”³⁹

A firm supporter of the inerrancy and inspiration of the Bible, Graebner nonetheless conceded that those beliefs “cannot be ‘proved.’” If “the great truths of salvation in the Scriptures, such as the grace of God, the love of the Father, the redemption through the Son, and others, do not enkindle in us the spiritual and absolutely unshaken faith that the records that bring us these messages are the very Word of God, then we shall never maintain this conviction.”⁴⁰ In that, Graebner agreed with Herman Sasse: “The main teaching of the

³⁶Graebner, “Unionism,” 99.

³⁷[Theodore] G[raebner], “Unionism—Hypocrisy,” *The Lutheran Witness* 46 (January 25, 1927): 23.

³⁸[Theodore] G[raebner], “Theology Jazzed,” *The Lutheran Witness* 38 (October 14, 1919): 330-31.

³⁹[Theodore] G[raebner], “Not Fundamentalists,” *The Lutheran Witness* 56 (November 30, 1937): 404.

⁴⁰[Theodore] G[raebner], “How Do We Meet the Objections to the Doctrine of Inspiration?” *The Lutheran Witness* 47 (October 16, 1928): 346.

Fundamentalists centered around the idea that once a man is convinced of the inerrancy of the Bible, he is also convinced of the divinity of Christ with all its consequences." The Lutheran Christian "believes in the Bible because he first believes in Christ."⁴¹

Though granting that the United Lutheran Church in America had a good confessional foundation, Graebner maintained that persistent un-Lutheran practices in the ULCA precluded fellowship of Missouri with the ULCA.⁴² He cited a *Lutheran Standard* report of one Lutheran congregation that joined in worship with Baptist, Presbyterian, United Brethren, and Methodist Episcopal area congregations, and another that hosted a Thanksgiving Day service with, among others, Christian Disciples, Unitarians, Universalists, Jews, and the Salvation Army participating. "Can we extend the hand of fellowship to Lutherans who so flagrantly deny their Lord?"⁴³

The Missouri Synod, he wrote in 1919, must resist the temptation to become a larger, "greater" church body at the expense of its doctrinal heritage.

Better a thousand times a Missouri Synod of only 10,000 souls, but faithful, than a body of a million honey-combed with the lodge-spirit and infected with unionism—that lethal leprosy of the Church. Let us stand firm, no matter what losses in membership and outward influence our stand may entail; the Lord must look out for that, it is none of our business. A Missouri Synod growing lax in practice, refusing to see the steady influences at work, afraid to testify, afraid to bring offenders to book, afraid to lose a congregation here or there which dispenses itself from obedience to the Word of God—a Missouri Synod growing effete, smug, and spineless, boasting of numbers while it permits dry rot to destroy the inner life, would not only be the kind of Church which Christ shall spew out of His mouth, but would bring down others into ruin and prove a traitor to all Lutheranism.⁴⁴

Graebner regarded himself and was regarded by others as a champion of Missouri's orthodoxy. When Seminary President Franz Pieper announced at a faculty meeting around 1930 that, after examining the faculty's printed class notes, he found every faculty member except

⁴¹Herman Sasse, "Luther and the Word of God," in *Accents in Luther's Theology: Essays in Commemoration of the 450th Anniversary of the Reformation*, ed. Heino O. Kadai (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 82-83.

⁴²[Theodore] G[raebner], "Why Lutherans Cannot Unite," *The Lutheran Witness* 36 (August 21, 1917): 263.

⁴³[Theodore] G[raebner], "Why We Cannot Join the Merger," *The Lutheran Witness* 37 (January 22, 1918): 22-23.

⁴⁴[Theodore] G[raebner], "Two Types of Lutheranism," *The Lutheran Witness* 38 (June 10, 1919): 183.

himself and Paul Kretzmann deviating from the Word of God, Graebner angrily stormed out of the room.⁴⁵

“As great a menace in separatism as in unionism”

Despite Graebner’s disclaimers against Fundamentalism, observers Leigh Jordahl and Milton Rudnick believed that Graebner and Missouri of the 1920s and 1930s shared some affinities with the Protestant Fundamentalist movement. Jordahl considered Graebner’s 1932 book *God and the Cosmos* “similar in tone and argument to the attacks on evolution of the Fundamentalists.” Graebner “was prominent among those Missourians who rejoiced over the Fundamentalist movement,” and “had considerable kinship with Fundamentalism.”⁴⁶ Rudnick concluded that there were “evidences of Fundamentalist influence” in Missouri’s history. The Synod’s writers were “vigorous opponents of Modernism,” and occasionally even “appeared to take [their] stand with the Fundamentalists rather than with other Lutheran bodies.” When Missouri writers “drew from Fundamentalist sources, it was usually to illustrate that others outside synodical circles held views similar to their own.”⁴⁷

Graebner wrote in 1922, “While we do not fellowship or make common cause with the sects around us, we are not isolated from them.” The “essence of the Gospel” was still preached among them, there were still Christians among them “with whom we are united in the One, invisible Church of Christ,” and “inasmuch as they are struggling to retain that measure of truth which they possess, our sincerest sympathies are with them.”⁴⁸ In that, he agreed with Edward Fredrich’s assessment: “We love the Fundamentalists most for the enemies they made. They fought our foes. They opposed what we too stand against and reject, the development we try to sum up and characterize with the general descriptions of liberalism and modernism.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵The story, as related by Paul Kretzmann’s nephew A.T. Kretzmann in an interview with Joel Pless, April 2, 1986, in “Cancer at Concordia: An examination of how the historical-critical method of Biblical interpretation was introduced to the classroom teaching at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, and what were the subsequent events” (senior church history paper, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis., library essay file, May 27, 1986), 16-17.

⁴⁶Leigh D. Jordahl, “The Theology of Franz Pieper: A Resource for Fundamentalistic Thought Modes Among American Lutherans,” *The Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (May 1971): 126.

⁴⁷Milton Rudnick, *Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod: A Historical Study of Their Interaction and Mutual Influence* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), ix, 72.

⁴⁸[Theodore] G[raebner], “New Theology and Higher Criticism,” *The Lutheran Witness* 41 (September 12, 1922): 295.

⁴⁹Edward C. Fredrich, “The Difference between Fundamentalism and Orthodoxy,” paper prepared for the Minnesota District Pastoral Conference, New Ulm, Minn., April 24, 1968), 9.

But while Graebner continued writing sharply-worded editorials and essays defending the Synod's positions, privately he was growing increasingly frustrated with what he regarded as rigid attitudes, traditionalism, and legalism among some pastors in the Missouri Synod and other Synodical Conference bodies.

A telling illustration of this can be found in an exchange of letters in 1924 and 1925 with a Minnesota pastor over the issue of life insurance. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Missouri Synod pastors strongly opposed the purchase of life insurance.⁵⁰ Three arguments were usually advanced: (1) life insurance "turned death, the biblical wages of sin, into a matter for profitable speculation"; (2) the insurance business "was founded wholly on selfish principles, not on genuine charity," because "it advocated doing good only for the healthy rather than those most in need of aid"; and (3) life insurance was based on usurious practices.⁵¹

Convinced that the Synod was no longer voicing its traditional opposition to insurance, Pastor W. F. Milbrath wrote Graebner, asking him for a theological opinion on the subject. Instead of providing a statement clearly condemning all forms of life insurance, Graebner answered that every life insurance contract must be examined individually. Though opposed to every form of insurance that "constitutes a gamble with human life," companies such as the Aid Association for Lutherans seemed only to combine the features of death benefits paid by mutual aid societies with bank savings accounts. When Milbrath requested names of specific companies that practiced what Graebner prescribed, Graebner replied that he would condemn a company only if its policy "involves an immoral gamble with human life, or other sinful features."

Clearly dissatisfied, Milbrath countered that if the St. Louis faculty held a different position now from the one it had maintained earlier, it should say so, and he requested that Graebner publish an article on life insurance in *The Lutheran Witness*. Refusing to comply, Graebner insisted that there had never been complete synodical agreement concerning life insurance, and that no one was ever excommunicated for holding opinions contrary to the synod's position. After additional fruitless exchanges, and hoping to terminate the correspondence, Graebner repeated his assertion that life insurance was in itself legitimate and that the burden of proof rested on those who dis-

⁵⁰Arthur C. Repp, "Changes in the Missouri Synod," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 38 (July-August 1967): 44.

⁵¹Everette Meier and Herbert T. Mayer, "The Process of Americanization," in Carl S. Meyer, ed., *Moving Frontiers: Readings in the History of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 347.

agreed. Milbrath then cited synodical positions—expressed by Friedrich Bente, Franz Pieper, and Graebner's own father⁵²—that life insurance was “wrong and sinful” and a “game of chance.” When Graebner failed to reply, Milbrath wrote a facetious letter chiding Graebner's refusal to address the issue in *The Witness*. Exasperated, Graebner fired back that Milbrath's attack “prompts me to say that I am beginning to understand those of my friends who believe that there is as great a menace to the peace of our Synod in separatism as there is in unionism.”⁵³

The exchange provides a microcosm of the larger transformation about to occur in Missouri. Milbrath regarded pronouncements by synodical fathers as a kind of timeless body of canon law. Because he viewed the interpretations of Bente, Pieper, and August Graebner as correct understandings and applications of Scripture, the issue for Milbrath revolved more around whether Missouri's current teachers and teachings conformed with what synodical fathers had said rather than whether they were truly in harmony with Scripture. The sheer volume of correspondence (eleven of the thirteen letters were exchanged in less than fourteen weeks) and Milbrath's dogged efforts to extract specific responses to carefully crafted questions reveal an intense desire for uniformity even on minor points of application. Graebner, on the other hand, found himself forced to defend a position with which he no longer fully agreed and which he found unattractive and legalistic. When pressed, he became evasive; his exasperation arose not as much over the precipitating issue itself but over the mindset and methodology of those who demanded the “right” answer to every question.

Indeed, for some time the Rev. E. Eckhardt of Blair, Nebraska, had been gathering, cataloguing, and indexing the opinions of the Missouri Synod from synodical and district minutes, official church papers and journals, and other sources into a seven-volume work called the *Homiletisches Reallexikon nebst Index rerum*, published between 1907

⁵²August L. Graebner had in fact written one of the most extensive expositions of Missouri's anti-insurance position: “*Das heutige Versicherungswesen*,” [“The Essence of Insurance Today,”] *Der Lutheraner* 48 (January 19, 1892): 9-11; (February 2, 1892): 18-20; (February 16, 1892): 25-27; (March 1, 1892): 38-39; (March 16, 1892): 47-48.

⁵³James W. Albers, “The History of Attitudes Within the Missouri Synod Toward Life Insurance” (Th. D. diss., Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1972), 362-67, summarizes and highlights the exchange between the two: Milbrath to Graebner, July 7, 1924; Graebner to Milbrath, July 22, 1924; Milbrath to Graebner, July 31, 1924; Graebner to Milbrath, August 2, 1924; Milbrath to Graebner, September 1, 1924; Graebner to Milbrath, September 4, 1924; Milbrath to Graebner, September 7, 1924; Graebner to Milbrath, September 17, 1924; Milbrath to Graebner, September 25, 1924; Graebner to Milbrath, September 27, 1924; Milbrath to Graebner, September 30, 1924; Milbrath to Graebner, July 10, 1925; Graebner to Milbrath, July 13, 1925; Graebner papers, Box 13.

and 1917. Commendable though the effort was—it produced “a veritable gold mine for official treatments of various topics”⁵⁴—Eckhardt’s volumes served to create an almost Talmudic body of “correct” Missouri teachings, practices, and expectations. “There is nothing like it in all the wide world,” Graebner wrote of the *Reallexikon*. “It is the sheet anchor of every man who finds himself criticized for his doctrinal position.” On any teaching or application, “his first refuge is Eckhardt.” Eckhardt “considered nothing more meritorious than to make entries in a catalog of opinions inerrantly orthodox and [of one voice] from 1847 and 1917,” and “all contradictory and discordant statements . . . were simply ignored.”⁵⁵ The *Reallexikon* “came to be used by Missouri Synod clergymen in a manner similar to [that of] the attorney searching for precedents in common law.”⁵⁶

Already in 1925, Graebner remarked on what he saw as a drift toward extremism among some Missouri pastors in their dealings with lodge members.⁵⁷ He saw a problem with pastors he termed “strict exclusivists” who preferred a blanket statement excluding all lodge members from receiving Holy Communion.⁵⁸ He recalled hearing a pastor in 1926 charge that the Synod had forfeited its doctrinal unity because “we have two contradictory attitudes on the question of church fairs and bazaars!”⁵⁹ Graebner predicted, “The more of these yokes we hang upon the brethren, the more we shall produce a reaction of liberalism and radicalism. I am as much against the 105% Missourian as I am the 95% Missourian.”⁶⁰

Graebner wrote to his brother in 1939, “It is evident that there are unwholesome influences at work” in the Missouri and other Synodical Conference synods.⁶¹ In 1941 he charged that Missouri’s synodical and pastoral practice was “verging towards a legalism which to a sound Lutheran is just as objectionable as doctrinal laxity.”⁶² Mis-

⁵⁴Jack Treon Robinson, “The Spirit of Triumphalism in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: The Role of ‘A Statement’ of 1945 in the Missouri Synod,” (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, Nashville, 1972), 33-34.

⁵⁵Theodore Graebner, “The Burden of Infallibility: A Study in the History of Dogma,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 38 (July 1965): 88-89.

⁵⁶Robinson, “The Spirit of Triumphalism,” 34.

⁵⁷Theodore Graebner to F.P. Wilhelm, January 7, 1926; Graebner papers, Box 55.

⁵⁸Theodore Graebner to the Lodge Committee, January 3, 1928; Graebner papers, Box 55.

⁵⁹*Speaking the Truth in Love: Essays Related to A Statement, Chicago, Nineteen Forty-five* (Chicago: Willow Press, n.d. [1946]), 13.

⁶⁰Theodore Graebner, “When Principles Usurp the Place of Doctrine,” (unpublished paper, St. Louis, 1937), 8; Graebner papers, Box 118.

⁶¹Theodore Graebner to Martin Graebner, May 26, 1939; Graebner papers, box 119

⁶²Theodore Graebner to Adolph Wismar, May 26, 1941; Graebner papers, box 119.

souri's traditionalism "was placing human authority above that of the Word of God," made fellowship dependent on "acceptance of every terminological detail in ecclesiastical dogma," treated the New Testament "as a code of laws" instead of a "body of saving doctrine," and "paid lip service to the *Sola Scriptura*" while "actually operating with synodical resolutions." Such traditionalism "throttled theological discussion" and "discouraged exegetical research, since the body of interpretation was (not in theory but in practice) regarded as fixed."⁶³ While Graebner's main concern came from legalistic leanings in his own synod, he also blamed "the morbid attitude of our Norwegian brethren" for "infiltrating" Missouri minds, particularly in the Minnesota District.⁶⁴ Graebner also attributed some Synodical Conference tensions to the "doctrinal hardening of the arteries" in the theologians of Wisconsin.⁶⁵

Graebner had been involved with the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau since its inception and with its magazine *The American Lutheran*. In the beginning, the ALPB did not seek to challenge the Synod's doctrinal position but only wanted to raise a "loyal opposition voice" regarding church practices, worship, and publicity methods. But the ALPB and *The American Lutheran* became a gathering point for those who shared Graebner's growing disenchantment. An editor of *The American Lutheran* complained to Graebner about "the hidebound type of men" in the Synod "who have entrenched themselves behind a high wall of traditionalism."⁶⁶

A review in *The Northwestern Lutheran* of Graebner's 1935 book, *The Borderland of Right and Wrong* said only that his book offered "a thorough treatment of the subject" of adiaphora and "discusses all the modern phases."⁶⁷ Perturbed at the brevity of this review, Graebner wrote to the editor, "There is bitter need of the most wide-spread attention to this matter of indifferent things, both in your Synod and in ours." Both synods had deficiencies regarding religious liberty and adiaphora, he charged. "Many of our [Missouri] conferences act as if they had forgotten there is a borderland between right and wrong, a field of adiaphora. Some of your [Wisconsin] conferences act as if they

⁶³Theodore Graebner, "The Cloak of the Cleric," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 44 (February 1971): 5-6.

⁶⁴Theodore Graebner to Martin Graebner, May 26, 1939.

⁶⁵Theodore Graebner to E.J.A. Marxhausen, September 13, 1946; Graebner papers, box 12.

⁶⁶Paul Lindemann to Theodore Graebner, November 8, 1936; Graebner papers, box 112.

⁶⁷[Fred] G[raber], "Review of *The Borderland of Right and Wrong. An Essay on the Adiaphora Based on Article X of the Formula of Concord*, by Theodore Graebner," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 22 (May 26, 1935): 176.

had never known it." Both synods "so badly need discussion lest we become hardened in legalism."⁶⁸

"Our former and principal objection to Scouting falls"

Graebner was originally a determined opponent of Scouting, writing a series of anti-Scouting articles for *Der Lutheraner* in 1916.⁶⁹ His opposition to Scouting lay in its moral and religious purposes. Scouting ignored essential ingredients of genuine moral development: the recognition of man's sinfulness and the need for repentance and spiritual regeneration. The Scout Law replaced genuine religious instruction. A daily Good Turn led to pharisaical work-righteousness.⁷⁰ Quoting the Scouts' *Official Handbook* that there were "many ways of following" one God, Graebner faulted Scouting for creating a false image of God and religion. Scouting regarded all religions as being on an equal plane. He feared Lutheran Scouts would feel obligated to attend unionistic services and compromise their faith by worshiping with Scouts of different denominations. Graebner considered the Scout oath frivolous, "exact[ing] of boys the common virtues of life which they should be expected to do as a matter of course."⁷¹ Graebner saw numerous parallels between the Scout movement and lodges and Freemasonry, once labeling the Boy Scouts "a preparatory school for Freemasonry and for the lodges in general."⁷²

Instead of remaining a sideline critic, however, Graebner met with Scout officials and listened as they pleaded for understanding of the true nature of their organization.⁷³ Because a 1925 handbook *Scouting Under Protestant Leadership* still made the Scout troop committee advisory to the Scoutmaster, Graebner repeated previous criticisms of Scouting in his *Winning the Lodge-Man*.⁷⁴ Initially disappointed at Graebner's objections, a director of Scouting relationships praised Graebner's spirit of cooperation and promised that Scout officials

⁶⁸Theodore Graebner to the editor, *The Northwestern Lutheran*, May 27, 1935; Graebner papers, box 71.

⁶⁹[Theodore] G[raebner], "Was ist von der 'Boy Scout'—Bewegung zu halten?" *Der Lutheraner* 72 (April 25, 1916): 158-60; (May 9, 1916): 178-80; (May 23, 1916): 198-99.

⁷⁰W. P. McGuire, editor of *Boy's Life* and *Scouting* to Theodore Graebner, December 15, 1915; Graebner papers, box 12.

⁷¹Theodore Graebner, "Y" *Religion and Boy Scout Morality* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, n.d.), 11-15.

⁷²Graebner, "Was ist von der 'Boy Scout'?" 198.

⁷³L.A. Komjachy to Theodore Graebner, July 2, 1920; C.A. Edson to Theodore Graebner, August 20, 1920; W. Barclay, Director of Department of Education, Boy Scouts of America, to Theodore Graebner, January 3, 1921; Graebner papers, box 12.

⁷⁴Theodore Graebner, *Winning the Lodge-Man* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1925), 69-71.

would put total direction of a Scout troop under the local congregation.⁷⁵ By 1927 Graebner decided that “our former and principal objection to Scouting falls.” Troops could be organized within congregations, granting complete control of the troop to congregationally-designated leaders. But when they attended cross-denominational Scout gatherings, “the Lutheran boys are not expected to take part in the general religious service.”⁷⁶

In time Graebner abandoned his other objections to Scouting. The Scout oath, he decided, was not strictly an oath, and its requirement of a Good Turn was not in itself wrong.⁷⁷ Scouting was purely a secular and civic organization, not a religious association; it recognized that developing good citizenship included a relationship to God but did not impose religious standards.⁷⁸ Graebner also reversed his objection to Scouting’s character training. Since “*Christian* character can be trained only through the Christian religion,” the false deduction is made that character cannot be trained by other means. But “there is such a thing as natural ethics,” and “even the pagans possessed their share of it.”⁷⁹

Summarizing his changed views on Scouting in 1946, Graebner said that “charges were made which can no longer be made today.” While encouraging religious instruction as “an ingredient in good citizenship,” Scouting “leaves the choice of church and religion to the Scout’s parents exactly as the public school.”⁸⁰ Under his influence, Missouri’s 1932 convention acknowledged the willingness of Boy Scout officials to remove objectionable features from its guidelines.⁸¹ Missouri’s 1938 convention adopted a report concluding 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.” Members of church groups were “in no wise required to take

⁷⁵Ray O. Wyland to Theodore Graebner, November 25, 1925 and December 12, 1925; Graebner papers, box 11.

⁷⁶Theodore Graebner, *Secret Empire* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1927), 218-23.

⁷⁷Manuscript, Theodore Graebner, “Memorandum on Scouting,” April 18, 1929; Graebner papers, box 12; “Report on Junior Organizations: Including the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Camp-Fire Girls, Hi-Y Societies, and Girl Reserves,” (submitted to the Pastors’ and Teachers’ Conference of the Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States by the Board for Young People’s Work, September 1, 1930), 5.

⁷⁸Manuscript, “The Relationship of Scouting to the Church,” paper prepared by the LCMS Bureau of Information on Secret Orders, Paul Bretscher, O.F. Engelbrecht, Theodore Graebner, E.L. Roschke, Board for Young People’s Work, March 19, 1945; Graebner papers, box 12. [Theodore] [Graebner], “Notes on Scouting,” *The Lutheran Witness* 64 (July 3, 1945): 212. [Graebner to Rev. R.J. Lillie, June 15, 1946; Graebner papers, box 12.

⁷⁹Theodore Graebner to Rev. R.J. Lillie, January 30, 1945; Graebner papers, box 12.

⁸⁰Graebner, “Notes on Scouting,” 212.

⁸¹*Missouri Proceedings, 1932*, 110.

part in any activities which are contrary to our principles.”⁸² Missouri’s 1944 convention adopted a report saying that after examining official Scout handbooks, they were “unable to find any factors which would violate our principles” and could not discover “anything in the practices of Scouting, as outlined in these handbooks, to which a Christian parent, scoutmaster, or pastor would take exception.” Thus “the matter of scouting should be left to the individual congregation to decide.”⁸³

Graebner saw “much more at stake than the Boy Scout issue.” He feared opposition to Scouting was one more symptom of an increasing affinity for quick, legalistic answers. “We are confronted with a churchmanship which operates with a mechanical use of Scripture and which stubbornly ignores the change which has taken place in the attitude of the Scout movement towards religion and the church.” He wished Lutheran clergymen in the 1940s could recognize that the “legalistic demand for uniformity where no Word of God can be quoted is just as far removed from sound Lutheranism as the indifferent, unionistic spirit.” He and others “who have been trained in the free air of Luther’s theology” would resist “being tyrannized in matters that can be construed as being sinful only by giving them an artificial and unnatural twist, as in the Boy Scout controversy.”⁸⁴

To the objection that Lutherans compromised their faith by joining the Scouts, uniting them with people of other faiths, Graebner replied that consistency would also require Lutherans to avoid courts of law because they permitted differing concepts of God when witnesses were placed under oath.⁸⁵ Graebner criticized Wisconsin Synod leaders for refusing to accept the positive contributions made by civic righteousness and the natural knowledge of God. He complained that Wisconsin wished “to have both the natural knowledge of God and the natural knowledge of the law hang suspended somewhere in a vacuum,” much as they “have accorded a space somewhere in the stratosphere to the doctrine of the *Una Sancta*.”⁸⁶

All Synodical Conference member bodies were encouraged to restudy the Scout question. Wisconsin directed a memorial to Mis-

⁸²*Missouri Proceedings, 1938*, 341.

⁸³*Missouri Proceedings, 1944*, 102.

⁸⁴Theodore Graebner to Philip Lange, March 17, 1945; April 11, 1945; Graebner papers, box 12.

⁸⁵Theodore Graebner to A[dalbert] Schaller, February 26, 1945; Graebner papers, box 12.

⁸⁶Theodore Graebner to Alfred Fuerbringer, December 1947; Theodore Graebner to John F. Chiotz, November 7, 1949; Graebner papers, box 12; Paul M. Bretscher and Theodore Graebner, “Report on Meeting with Intersynodical Relations Committee,” February 14, 1947; Graebner papers, box 12.

souri's 1947 convention, saying they found it "difficult to reconcile the Saginaw report"⁸⁷ of Missouri's 1944 convention with its 1938 resolution, which spoke of "naturalistic and unionistic tendencies still prevalent in the Boy Scout movement."

Over the next decade, Wisconsin repeated and amplified its position against Scouting. Arthur Voss reviewed the history of the "Theses on Scouting in the Lutheran Church,"⁸⁸ demonstrating that Missouri and Wisconsin had not only agreed in their opposition to Scouting but that "in 1934 a motion prevailed in the Mixed Conference that the respective pastoral conferences of Milwaukee should deal with such congregations whose position with regard to Scouting differed from that of the Mixed Pastoral Conference."⁸⁹ The full text of those theses was adapted into the tract *Scouting in the Light of Scripture*.

Numerous detailed studies of Scouting were now widely circulated in the Wisconsin Synod, among them *What Should Be Our Attitude Toward Boy Scouts*⁹⁰ and *Scouting in the Light of Holy Scripture*.⁹¹ Carleton Toppe's essay, "A Time-Honored Warning Against Present Dangers to the Church from Pharisaism," delivered in 1948 and reprinted in the 1951 *Quartalschrift*,⁹² contained a lengthy analysis of Scouting. Wisconsin faulted the "Pro Deo et Patria Award," conferred by the Lutheran Church on Boy Scouts who "have fulfilled a prescribed course of spiritual improvement" and "given outstanding service to [their] local congregations."⁹³ Promoters of the Award acknowledged that it was "intended to stimulate a Boy Scout to more zealous fulfillment of the Scout Promise and the Twelfth Scout Law."

By 1952, a report of the Synodical Conference Committee on Scouting concluded that differences between the synods had become entrenched. The eight committee members from the Missouri and Slovak Synods considered Scouting "a secular boys' organization designed to promote good citizenship" but maintained that it did not teach reli-

⁸⁷Wisconsin Proceedings, 1947, 105.

⁸⁸Arthur P. Voss, "History of the 'Theses on Scouting in the Lutheran Church,'" *The Northwestern Lutheran* 32 (August 19, 1945): 170.

⁸⁹"Theses on Scouting in the Lutheran Church," *The Northwestern Lutheran* 32 (August 19, 1945): 172-74. See A[dalbert] Schaller, review of *Scouting in the Light of Scripture*, in *Quartalschrift* 43 (July 1946): 221-22.

⁹⁰Wilmer] Valleskey, *What Should Be Our Attitude Toward Boy Scouts?* (Mimeographed, available from L. Hallauer, n.d.).

⁹¹Erhard C. Pankow, *Scouting in the Light of Holy Scripture* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1949).

⁹²Carleton Toppe, "A Time-Honored Warning Against Present Dangers to the Church from Pharisaism," *Quartalschrift* 48 (July 1951): 186-91; (October 1951): 269-73.

⁹³[Paul] Peters, "The 'Pro Deo et Patria Award,'" *Quartalschrift* 48 (July 1951): 208-209.

gion. Scouting “does not promise spiritual blessings such as forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.” The Scout oath “is not an oath in the religious sense.” In their view, objections stemmed from false views of Scouting principles, false applications of Scripture regarding the natural knowledge of God, and “an apparent unwillingness to accept documented evidence in support of principles under which Scouting is now conducted in its relation to the churches.” The seven Wisconsin and Norwegian members of the Committee on Scouting objected that “in some of the fundamental features of the Scout program there are religious elements with which a Christian cannot identify himself without offending against the Word of God.” Scouting’s objectionable features had “not been removed by any changes that have been made in the organization and program of Scouting.”⁹⁴

**“Definitely for fellowship with any Lutheran body
which adheres to the true doctrine”**

Perhaps most remarkable—and certainly most ruinous for the future of the Lutheran Synodical Conference—was Graebner’s change on church fellowship.

In 1917⁹⁵ and 1923,⁹⁶ Graebner opposed prayer fellowship with heterodox Christians, citing Romans 16:17-18. In a *Concordia Theological Monthly* article in 1931, he wrote that “in establishing church fellowship, the deciding factor is that of a common confession.” While “we may be convinced that our own fellow-Lutheran is a sincere Christian,” that is “not our reason for being associated [in fellowship] with him; the ground of that association is his agreement with us in profession [of faith].” The duty of “acknowledging those as brethren who are one with us in their public profession of Scripture doctrines and principles has as its corollary the duty of refusing fellowship to those who disagree with us in public profession.”⁹⁷

In *The Problem of Lutheran Union and Other Essays*, which Graebner wrote in 1935, he insisted, “We cannot approve of the union of conservative Ohio or Buffalo Synod elements with Swedish radicals and chiliasts in the A[merican] L[utheran] C[onference].” Were Missouri to enter a fellowship relationship with such bodies, “we would join only a faction and either become the cause of new and sharper

⁹⁴*Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1952*, 145-47.

⁹⁵[Theodore] G[raebner], “Joint Reformation Celebrations,” *The Lutheran Witness* 36 (September 18, 1917): 292.

⁹⁶[Theodore] G[raebner], “Letters to a Masonic Friend,” *The Lutheran Witness* 42 (February 27, 1923): 66-68.

⁹⁷Theodore Graebner, “What is Unionism?” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 2 (August 1931): 581.

conflicts or, worse still, ourselves become tolerant of false doctrine through such new associations—this has surely been proved to the satisfaction of every reader.”⁹⁸

But both *The Lutheran Witness* and *The American Lutheran* approved Missouri’s 1938 Union Resolutions, urging a declaration of fellowship between the American Lutheran Church and the Synodical Conference. In 1940, Graebner wrote, “Since the summer of 1938 nothing has happened to prove that the articles adopted by the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church do not represent a true unity in doctrine.” He acknowledged that ALC pastors did “not represent a uniform ‘institutional’ theology” as did Missouri’s pastors, yet he believed that “the controversies [with the ALC] have been settled in agreement with the Word of God.” And he wondered how far critics in the Norwegian and Wisconsin Synods would “press the Scriptural demand for ‘speaking the same thing’ (1 Cor. 1:10).”⁹⁹

In 1943, with the publication of *Toward Lutheran Union*, Graebner and co-author Paul Kretzmann seemed to disavow the fellowship stands he had taken only 8 years before. Warning against “a mechanical and automatic application” of the Romans 16 injunction to avoid false teachers, he added, “I do not see that such passages help us determine what our conduct must be in certain contacts with people belonging to heterodox communities—people who are not teachers at all, who are not trying to seduce us, and whose views we do not for a moment propose to share.”¹⁰⁰

Graebner’s changing views on fellowship and church union drew immediate criticism. He blamed Wisconsin Synod professors and editors for supplying the theology of the fellowship criticisms and the Norwegian Synod for “the virulence of vocabulary and the use of insinuation added to the weapons of traditionalism.”¹⁰¹

A Norwegian Synod review of *Toward Lutheran Union* documented the altered position of Graebner and Kretzmann, concluding that their book would “undoubtedly confuse many TOWARD AN UN-LUTHERAN UNION.”¹⁰² North Dakota Pastor T. N. Teigen charged Graebner with glossing over doctrinal problems in the Norwegian

⁹⁸Theodore Graebner, *The Problem of Lutheran Union and Other Essays* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1935), 102.

⁹⁹Theodore Graebner, “Not a Sect—Yet,” *The American Lutheran* 23 (January 1940): 7-8.

¹⁰⁰Theodore Graebner and Paul E. Kretzmann, *Toward Lutheran Union: A Scriptural and Historical Approach* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943), 208-10.

¹⁰¹Graebner, “The Cloak of the Cleric,” 10.

¹⁰²S. C. Ylvisaker, “Book Review,” *The Lutheran Sentinel* 26 (July 27, 1943): 220-23; emphasis in the original.

Lutheran Church in America: "Those of us who have been at Concordia Seminary and know your eagle eye for the goings on in the ecclesiastical world" and "who have some acquaintance with the efficiency of your filing system will have no little difficulty believing that you do not have a good file of the many aberrations in doctrine that have been printed and defended in the official papers of the NLCA during the past twenty-five years."¹⁰³

Wisconsin Synod spokesman Henry Koch wrote in 1942 that "within the liberal Lutheran church bodies of our country" there existed "a growing tendency to minimize the importance of unity in doctrine and practice and to stress the necessity for the union of all Lutheran churches so as to be in a better position to display more strength and exert a greater influence on public opinion in these critical times." Because they are "shrewd enough to recognize the hopelessness of uniting the various Lutheran church bodies in questions of doctrine and practice," these liberal Lutheran bodies "shift the general attention to externals in which the church may be in a position to do joint work and thus at least create the impression as though there were unity and strength and uniformity of purpose."¹⁰⁴

Graebner said Koch's evaluation "completely falsified the records." As Graebner saw things, other Lutherans were not "steadily going downward confessionally" but were "on the upward trend and will continue if we don't kick them in the face."¹⁰⁵ Yes, Missouri's Friederich Bente in 1905¹⁰⁶ had "denounced all prayer with those not in full agreement with us, and as concerns the intersynodical conferences of those days he was right." But Graebner was convinced that those Lutheran bodies had "changed so radically that there is no resemblance" between their stance in 1905 and in 1942. "Then they met with us to disseminate and defend their errors; today they meet to gain an understanding of our position and to accept whatever the Word of God demands."¹⁰⁷

Graebner's view agreed with that of O. H. Pannkoke. Writing in *The National Lutheran*, a publication of the National Lutheran Council, Pannkoke said that "in 1918, while there were strong conserva-

¹⁰³T. N. Teigen to Theodore Graebner, August 24, 1943; Graebner papers, box 70.

¹⁰⁴H[enry] A. Koch, "Dangerous, Eventually Fatal Steps," *Quartalschrift* 39 (July 1942), 187.

¹⁰⁵Theodore Graebner to Adolph Ackermann, Mankato, Minn., October 5, 1942; Graebner papers, box 71.

¹⁰⁶Friederich Bente, "Warum koennen wir keine gemeinsame Gottesdienste mit Ohioern und Iowaern veranstalten und abhalten?" *Lehre und Wehre* 51 (February 1905): 49-53; (March 1905): 97-115.

¹⁰⁷Graebner, "The Burden of Infallibility," 91.

tive elements in the United Lutheran Church, there were also important sections who knew little and cared less for Lutheran essentials and felt no loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions." But "to the largest extent those elements have disappeared." The ULCA in 1943 was, in his view, "not only committed to the Lutheran Confessions, but it understands and is loyal to the great Lutheran fundamentals." The "great sin," as Pannkoke termed it, was that "men are not aware of these changes and keep alive a picture of the other side which is hardly more than a caricature."¹⁰⁸

About his critics, Graebner wrote, "A steady attempt is being made to undermine the faith in our adherence to the doctrine we taught ten and twenty-five years ago, by the simple technique of quoting what we wrote then under one set of circumstances, and what we are writing now, under a different set of circumstances."¹⁰⁹ He was "definitely for fellowship with any Lutheran body outside the Synodical Conference which adheres to the true doctrine and shows a willingness to put sound principles of church life into practice."¹¹⁰

To Missouri Synod President John W. Behnken, Graebner explained the basis of his understanding of Romans 16:

If the people Paul is speaking of here had been in the congregation, we would expect him to tell the Romans first of all to make efforts to get the offenders to repent and to win them back from their error. But he says nothing of the kind. He beseeches them: Watch out for those people. Don't have anything to do with them. They are dangerous. Avoid them or they will deceive you and do you harm. In view of this fact we should not apply this text to Christian errorists if we wish to remain in the context of the warning of verse 17.¹¹¹

Graebner reported on cases in which Missouri pastors refused to commune ALC and ULCA members in the armed forces or working in new war-time industries because they were not members of the Synodical Conference. "Should we refuse to accept at the Lord's Table all persons who do not hold membership in a body which has official relations with the Missouri Synod though they are 'worthy communicants' in the Scriptural sense?" Graebner: answered "unhesitatingly" that "we have no right to refuse admittance to the Lord's Table." Synodical Conference churches would typically welcome "guests" at Communion from

¹⁰⁸O[tto] H. Pannkoke, "I believe in Lutheran Unity," *The National Lutheran*; cited by H[enry] A. Koch, "As Others See Us," *Quartalschrift* 40 (January 1943): 73.

¹⁰⁹Theodore Graebner to F.W. Janzow, March 9, 1944; Graebner papers, box 70.

¹¹⁰Theodore Graebner to Hilmer Zuege, April 27, 1943; Graebner papers, box 71.

¹¹¹Theodore Graebner to John W. Behnken, December 22, 1949; Graebner papers, box 114.

other Synodical Conference churches because they were “with us in church fellowship” and “the Lord’s Supper is indeed a meal of fellowship.” But “we have never so stressed this feature as to exclude from its consolations anyone in every [other] sense ‘worthy’ of the Sacrament.” In view of “the present mass movements of population” and especially “with regard to the men in the armed forces who are not in fellowship with us,” Graebner urged compliance with the practice outlined by the Missouri Synod’s Army and Navy Commission: “In exceptional cases synodical fellowship is not a necessary precondition for admission to the Lord’s Supper.” Chaplains “may commune such men in the armed forces as are conscious of the need of repentance and hold the essence of faith, including the doctrines of the Real Presence and of the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace.” Graebner added that if readers construed his words “as another evidence of ‘new Missouri,’” they should be aware that his recommendation was simply “the reaffirmation of the position taken by Dr. Walther and others” in 1867.¹¹²

Wisconsin Synod Pastor Egbert Schaller responded, “If it is a sin to belong to a heterodox body at all, it is a sin whether the person has knowledge of his heterodoxy or not. To affirm the contrary is to contradict the doctrine of Scripture and the Lutheran position.” Any heterodox church member coming for Holy Communion “must be told of the sin in which he is living and promise to amend,” which would be demonstrated by a willingness to join a congregation in doctrinal fellowship. “Failing this, he cannot be accepted at our altar. He is not able to examine himself, and by maintaining fellowship with heterodoxy he is partaker of others’ sin.” Wartime emergencies “cannot be pleaded as cause for departure from Scriptural principles.”¹¹³

Graebner argued back: “You call it a sin in any and under all circumstances to belong to a heterodox body. This signifies that we are to treat all people [who are] not orthodox believers as being on the way to Perdition.” Graebner appealed to St. Bernard “who died a repentant sinner but he never repented of his having been a Roman Catholic, and went to Perdition,” and to William Jennings Bryan “who wore himself out in the defense of biblical truth, but he was a Methodist, died in his sin, and went to his place. There is something wrong with your reasoning, is there not?”¹¹⁴

Schaller immediately located the flaw in Graebner’s reasoning: “Where did I ever say that a person connected with a heterodox Church is for that reason on his way to Perdition? Who mentioned Perdition at

¹¹²Theodore Graebner, “Holy Communion and Synodical Membership,” *The Lutheran Witness* 62 (June 22, 1943): 210.

¹¹³Egbert Schaller to Theodore Graebner, July 1, 1943; Graebner papers, box 71.

¹¹⁴Theodore Graebner to Egbert Schaller, July 3, 1943; Graebner papers, box 71.

all in this discussion?" By accepting or refusing fellowship at the communion altar, he was not determining that person's eternal fate. "All I know about such a person is that he is practicing fellowship with error. If he wants to practice fellowship with us at the same time, I say to him: No man can serve two Masters. You must leave the one. That is elementary theology and Lutheran practice. We cannot commune members of any heterodox church while they are members of it."¹¹⁵

Wisconsin Synod President John Brenner, in a letter declining an invitation to attend a pan-Lutheran Conference in 1942, explained that "our Synod is of the conviction that cooperation, even only in externals, should not as a means to an end, precede the establishment of true unity between two bodies, but should follow as the result and expression of a Scriptural unity previously established."¹¹⁶ But during the next two years, repeated and publicly reported conferences and activities took place involving the joint participation of Missouri Synod leaders and representatives of other Lutheran bodies. One was Graebner's attendance at the ULCA's 1942 convention.¹¹⁷ His appearance was hailed as signaling "a new day in Lutheranism." Invited to address the convention, Graebner insisted that a "cheerless attitude" regarding Missouri-ULCA fellowship was unwarranted because "we have found it possible to join our efforts with yours" through chaplaincies and other services. "Lutheran bodies must act together if they will make their contributions" to the world.¹¹⁸

In view of these reports, Brenner protested to the 1944 Synodical Conference convention, "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."¹¹⁹

The next year, a young Wisconsin Synod pastor, noting that faculty members of Concordia, Wartburg, and Capital seminaries had opened a meeting together with joint prayer, asked: Are the faculty members of these schools "exempted from the recommendations and advices enjoined upon the membership of the Synodical Conference concerning fellowship with the ALC?" Any objective study of the fellowship issue would be made more difficult "in the light of repeated behind the scenes cabals and intrigues, which are then blatantly advertised, and the brethren saddled with the accomplished fact."¹²⁰ Annoyed with the

¹¹⁵Egbert Schaller to Theodore Graebner, July 6, 1943; Graebner papers, box 71.

¹¹⁶[Joh. P.] M[eyer], "President Brenner's Letter," *Quartalschrift* 39 (July 1942): 215.

¹¹⁷"Distinguished Visitors," *The Lutheran* 25 (October 28, 1942): 31.

¹¹⁸G. Elson Ruff, "The Church in Convention in Louisville," *The Lutheran* 25 (October 28, 1942): 39.

¹¹⁹*Wisconsin Proceedings, 1945, 74.*

¹²⁰Reinhart Pope to Theodore Graebner, May 31, 1945; Graebner papers, box 71.

“cabals and intrigues” remark,¹²¹ Graebner offered only the defense that joint prayer in such circumstances “was in complete accord with a resolution of our Synod (Saginaw, 1944) which declares that such joint prayer does not militate against former synodical regulations.”¹²²

**“We deplore the fact that Romans 16 has been applied
to all Christians who differ from us”**

Missouri pastors found in their mail in late September 1945 an unsolicited proclamation deploring the traditionalism and legalism that purportedly had overtaken their synod. An invitation letter had been sent to select Missouri pastors and professors known to share concerns over the Synod’s alleged faults. They came “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” they saw in their synod.¹²³ Among the forty-two clergymen and one layman who signed the resulting document, entitled “A Statement,” were synodical veterans William F. Arndt, Richard R. Caemmerer, O. A. Geiseman, W. G. Polack, and Theodore Graebner.¹²⁴

“A Statement” was composed of 12 affirmative statements, 9 of which were followed by statements deploring a synodical attitude or practice. Statement Five said “We affirm our conviction that sound exegetical procedure is the basis for sound Lutheran theology.” It added, “We therefore deplore the fact that Romans 16:17 and 18 has been applied to all Christians who differ from us in certain points of doctrine.” The conviction of the signers was that “this text does not apply to the present situation in the Lutheran Church in America.”¹²⁵

One former student wrote to Graebner, pointing out the difference implied in Statement Five, as well as in his 1943 book *Prayer Fellowship*, compared to what he had heard Graebner say in the 1936 fall term at Concordia Seminary. In reference to verse 17 of Romans 16, Graebner had said that “those who make divisions and offences against the doctrine which they have been taught” do so “when people agree to work together in spite of their religious differences.” The teachers referred to in the Romans passage include “all those who depart from any doctrine, or those who destroy the foundation of faith, unbelievers,” including Unitarians, Christian Scientists, Mormons, and others.

¹²¹In a second response, Graebner characterized Pope’s criticism as a “rather ugly charge” and demanded he withdraw it, and “that you will send me a specific withdrawal.” Theodore Graebner to Reinhart Pope, June 18, 1945; Graebner papers, box 71.

¹²²Theodore Graebner to Reinhart Pope, June 6, 1945; Graebner papers, box 71.

¹²³Thomas Coates, “A Statement—Some Reminiscences,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 43 (November 1970): 159-60.

¹²⁴“A Statement,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 43 (November 1970): 152.

¹²⁵“A Statement,” *The American Lutheran* 28 (November 1945): 4.

Graebner had taught that this passage referred not only to “errors of the extreme kind,” but his words “must mean the very dangerous ones—*those correct in every way, but one.*” The writer then asked Graebner: “Would you please tell me which exegesis you stand behind today? I cannot harmonize the two, in spite of the fact that you say in the *Witness* that you have not changed your mind.” In his view, Graebner would have to repudiate either the view he presented in 1936 or the one he championed in “Prayer Fellowship” and “A Statement.”¹²⁶

Graebner answered that that he could see “no difference between the exegesis contained in [the writer’s] 1936 notes and [his] present position.” Since he believed the ALC was moving closer to the Missouri position, Graebner contended, it was “not a difference of understandings of the passage in Romans but of its application to certain Lutherans.” His former student placed “an intolerable demand on the church if you expect every traditional interpretation [of Scripture] to be upheld.” Graebner supported the traditional exegesis of Romans 16, but even if he did not, “it would be a most un-Lutheran procedure to insist on exegetical uniformity.”¹²⁷

A year later, Graebner received a letter from another former student, Siegbert W. Becker. A 1938 graduate, Becker was then a 32-year-old pastor in Sac City, Iowa. Becker referenced a Graebner comment in the footnote of a *Lutheran Witness* article by Henry Hamann, that “we incline to the notion, supported by more than 30 commentaries we have consulted, that Romans 16:17f. refers to un-Christian enemies of the Church.”¹²⁸ Becker wondered how many of those commentaries “were written by men who had made sport of the doctrine concerning unionism.” In his own pastoral conference, Becker reported, “One of our men here systematically in a conference paper went through every passage which we have traditionally quoted against unionism and showed that not one of them could be applied to people who are still Christians.” When Becker asked his conference-mate if there were any passages left against unionism, the man replied, “John 8:31.” Becker said, “The devil will not have a hard time getting rid of that one.” He

¹²⁶Milton H. Otto to Theodore Graebner, May 22, 1946; Graebner papers, box 114. Otto explained that he was referring to “my notes, approved by you, and preserving your manner of expression, almost to a fault.” Into the 1930s and beyond, Concordia students were expected to copy their professors’ lectures verbatim or close to it, and their copy work was checked for accuracy; see Frederick W. Danker, *No Room in the Brotherhood. The Preus-Otten Purge of Missouri* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, Inc., 1977), 8-9; George P. Schmidt, “Reminiscences of Concordia Seminary in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 43 (May 1970): 80.

¹²⁷Theodore Graebner to Milton H. Otto, May 24, 1946; Graebner papers, box 114.

¹²⁸H[enry] Hamann, “Church Fellowship,” *The Lutheran Witness* 66 (February 25, 1947): 59.

added, "Personally, I am inclined to think that if Rom. 16 must go, then eventually the doctrine of unionism must go with it."¹²⁹

Graebner argued that Romans 16:17 was not a "historically important text on unionism" but was cited in Missouri's Synodical Constitution in reference to schismatics or separatists. "In all the dogmatic literature of the Lutheran Church it has never been cited against what we call unionism today." He shared Becker's concern about the conference paper: "Whoever says that only John 8:31 forbids all fellowship with heterodox Christians has simply not given the matter any study."¹³⁰

Graebner's response did not satisfy Becker. "I have always understood the words 'schismatic' and 'separatists' as referring to just such as we find in the ALC," he replied. "Therefore, in my opinion, Rom. 16:17 has been historically applied by our church to the ALC." Becker questioned Graebner's assertion that the passage was never cited against unionism. "I am sure you are acquainted with the fact that it is the first passage quoted by Dr. Pieper in his chapter on unionism and again is the only passage quoted by him in the chapter on schism."¹³¹ Referring to Romans 16:18, Becker wrote, "If you don't want to call [the ALC] 'belly-server,' I am satisfied if you will call them 'ravenous wolves.' In my opinion, anyone who teaches the slightest false doctrine is a ravenous wolf, even though I like the guy, like I do my priest across the street." Becker concluded that he had "always had a great deal of admiration" for Graebner, "but I think you're wrong about Rom. 16:17,18."¹³²

Another pastor's correspondence was harsher. "There was a time that I fairly idolized you for your sound stand for everything scriptural, both in doctrine and in practice," but "that has changed." He urged Graebner to "retire to your farm and not continue to lead weak brethren to follow you."¹³³ Such comments only stiffened Graebner's resolve: "Every passing week we become more and more convinced that it was high time that we adopted the Chicago Statement. The Synod is heavily surcharged with legalism and with an utterly loveless attitude toward the brother."¹³⁴

"The Synodical Conference is an ecclesiastical nuisance"

In three emotional, sometimes rambling and gossipy papers—"The Cloak of the Cleric," "For a Penitent Jubilee," and "The Burden of

¹²⁹Siegbert W. Becker to Theodore Graebner, February 28, 1947; Graebner papers, box 114.

¹³⁰Theodore Graebner to Siegbert W. Becker, March 6, 1947; Graebner papers, box 114.

¹³¹See Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), III: 422, 425.

¹³²Siegbert Becker to Theodore Graebner, March 10, 1947; Graebner papers, box 114.

¹³³O. F. P. Weinbach to Theodore Graebner, April 29, 1950; Graebner papers, box 114.

¹³⁴Theodore Graebner to Carl A. Gieseler, March 28, 1946; Graebner papers, box 71.

Infallibility: a Study in the History of Dogma"—Graebner near the end of his life unburdened his displeasure with Missouri's culture and laid bare the transformation in his thinking.¹³⁵

While "all the world takes for granted that conditions may change and that judgments regarding institutions and persons must consider the possibility of change," in Missouri "this is brushed aside as completely beside the point." Signs that change has occurred "are accepted only with great reluctance." Not only has the idea developed that Missouri was "without flaw or error in all our past applications of Holy Writ," but synodical teachers felt themselves "in duty bound to pass the same judgments no matter what the change may be in the situation."¹³⁶

In the Synod there has been "a tendency to give undue weight to the opinions of the fathers." Quotations from Luther, Walther, Pieper, volumes of *Lehre und Wehre*, and the accumulated body of synodical essays are consulted to determine practice. "I challenge anyone to look into the literature of any church but our own to find anything parallel to this situation." Whenever "a question arises in a field of dogma, we ask: What does Dr. Pieper say in his *Dogmatik*?" During the previous 35 years of synodical literature, Graebner could recall no readiness even to assume "that possibly some earlier issue of the [*Concordia Theological Monthly*] or *Lutheran Witness* or *Der Lutheraner* had been in error." Such a theology, wrote Graebner, "claims orthodoxy" but "makes of the New Testament a code of laws" that was "inflexible and valid not only *semper* but *ad semper*" ("not only always but forever"). Agreement with the past must be "uninterrupted and hidebound," even "maintained in phrasing and terminology."¹³⁷

In a conservative body such as Missouri "there is always one escape from the problems one meets in ministerial practice. 'Be strict! Say 'No!' Make no change! Permit no innovations! Don't consider, don't think, the easy thing is to make a 'simple rule' and abide by it." Lacking proper theological foundations, "there is no other way out for [a Lutheran pastor] than to seek refuge in some *formula*." He has "one element of strength left and that is *tradition*. He does what *the fathers* did." When charged with legalism or lovelessness, "he will give vent to

¹³⁵"The Cloak of the Cleric" was written for private discussion within Concordia Seminary's faculty in the late 1940s but not published until 1971, *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 44 (February 1971): 3-12. "For a Penitent Jubilee" was read before Missouri's New York Pastoral Conference on May 21, 1946, mimeographed for wider dissemination on December 10, 1948, and published in *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 45 (February 1972): 3-28. "The Burden of Infallibility" was also circulated privately after being written in 1948 and published in *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 38 (July 1965): 88-94.

¹³⁶Graebner, "The Burden of Infallibility," 89.

¹³⁷Graebner, "The Burden of Infallibility," 88, 90.

anger, and will charge his critic with liberalism, denial of the truth, apostasy from the Lutheran faith."¹³⁸

Graebner lamented "the decay of good manners which has befallen certain areas of our clergy." The expectation that a gentleman—whether Christian or not, even among "carpenters, brick-layers, barbers, not to speak of lawyers and businessmen"—would in a dispute choose his language "with some cautious reserve" had all but disappeared among pastors. Because their duty is "to defend the purity of doctrine, orthodoxy, conservatism, confessionalism," and because they want to show "that they love the truth more than any man," the one thing "that gets these folks mad is being reminded of the Eighth Commandment and of the Law of Love." An opponent's character must not be spared. "Whenever emphasis on the truth demands it, he must be pilloried in his ignorance of Scripture, his inability to think logically, his shiftiness and his dishonesty, his disloyalty and apostasy." No mere speculations, Graebner claimed that such attacks are "on record in mimeograph and print."¹³⁹

Graebner even accepted a share of the blame for Missouri's current atmosphere. "I can view with some composure and without righteous indignation [the attacks directed against me] because I felt that through my former attitudes in the editorial pages of *Lehre und Wehre* and an occasional *Lutheran Witness* article I have done much to create a hyperorthodox attitude towards those of the same confession and I must expect the sponsors for the same kind of orthodoxism to vent their spleen against my person."¹⁴⁰ But he grew to be irretrievably estranged from much of his own Synod. "I am beginning to realize more and more that the Synodical Conference is an ecclesiastical nuisance of the first order." Organized to bring unity to American Lutherans, "it has become the most potent source of dissension and strife in existence."¹⁴¹

Graebner retired from his professorship at Concordia and the editorship of *The Lutheran Witness* in 1949 and died the next year, November 14, 1950, nine days short of his 74th birthday.¹⁴²

"Your leadership has brought confusion and harm"

Notice of the death of Theodore Graebner was carefully non-committal in the Wisconsin Synod's *Quartalschrift*: "Through his long years of service as theological professor, he exerted a marked influence on several generations of pastors of his own synod, and his role as the

¹³⁸Graebner, "For a Penitent Jubilee," 4.

¹³⁹Graebner, "For a Penitent Jubilee," 20-22.

¹⁴⁰Theodore Graebner to Alfred Doeffer, July 11, 1947; Graebner papers, box 116.

¹⁴¹Theodore Graebner to Paul Bretscher, November 18, 1946; Graebner papers, box 70.

¹⁴²Bretscher, "Theodore Conrad Graebner," 1.

widely known editor of *The Lutheran Witness* undoubtedly gave added weight to the opinions voiced in other literary productions."¹⁴³

Valparaiso's O. P. Kretzmann called Graebner one of the "three or four churchmen of our generation with the Lutheran Church in America who will become a legend as the years pass." Maybe more than any other churchman of his era, "he had a sharp and relevant sense of the present."¹⁴⁴

His admirers generally regard his "willingness to reexamine his position when conditions changed or when new information was available" as "the finest quality of his work." He maintained "a unique balance between a conservative, scholarly theology and an openness to new ideas," said one.¹⁴⁵ Said another, he could "frankly acknowledge that he might well have been mistaken about some interpretation or the appropriateness of some application of a given Bible passage."¹⁴⁶ He became increasingly fearful of the use of "ecclesiastical words, meaning one thing to one, something else to another." More than once he "ordered his publishers to remove from the shelves such of his publications as, in his opinion, no longer applied to the present."¹⁴⁷

Although the changes in Graebner's thinking can be readily charted, "he did not provide as clear an explanation of what happened in his experience to cause his strongly changing views." Perhaps "he might have articulated that better if he had had extended retirement, offering him opportunity for reflection apart from the day-to-day demands of teaching, writing, and editing."¹⁴⁸

For a sizeable portion of the Missouri Synod and for most all of the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods, however, Graebner's theological transformation caused confusion, disagreement, and a sense of betrayal. Those changes were most publicly apparent in the changing tone of *The Lutheran Witness*. The Norwegian Synod "waited deliberately" for Missouri officials "to take the necessary steps to have *The Lutheran Witness* represent more faithfully the attitude of the Synod it serves."¹⁴⁹ Wisconsin Professor Edmund Reim remarked on how the

¹⁴³M[ax] Lehniger, "Prof. Dr. Theodore Conrad Graebner," *Quartalschrift* 48 (January 1951): 59.

¹⁴⁴O. P. Kretzmann, "By the Way," *The Walther League Messenger* 59 (January 1951): 4.

¹⁴⁵Pfabe, "Theodore Graebner," 254.

¹⁴⁶O. A. Geiseman, "While It Is Day: Continued Growth," *The American Lutheran* 34 (January 1951): 5.

¹⁴⁷Bretscher, "Theodore Conrad Graebner," 5-6.

¹⁴⁸Jerrald Pfabe to Mark Braun, June 30, 2006.

¹⁴⁹S. C. Ylvisaker, "A Necessary Statement," *The Lutheran Sentinel* 27 (March 13, 1944): 68-69.

Witness “became newsier” and how the news became “more and more of one color.” The stern reproof of the old *Lutheran Witness* was by the 1940s largely gone. As one read the “new” *Witness*, it was difficult to tell that there were large groups of Missouri pastors and congregations “thoroughly alarmed over this modern trend.” The viewpoints and activities of these “Old Missourians” apparently had little “news value” or did not fit the *Witness*.¹⁵⁰ This change was attributed largely to Graebner and his influence.

His change was even viewed by some as a soul-destroying force. S. C. Ylvisaker, President of Bethany Lutheran College, invited to attend the celebration of Graebner’s 50th anniversary in the ministry in 1947, sent instead a response that was nothing less than a call to repentance:

We are disturbed lest any partaking of ours in the present exercises might be misunderstood by you or others. For it is only too clear that you in more recent years have allied yourself with those who chafe at the bit of sound Lutheran theology, and the effect of your wayward leadership has already brought confusion and harm within your own Synod and our whole Synodical Conference. You have published treatises which show poor scholarship and breathe a different spirit. You have publicly labeled our Synod as separatistic, nay, as a sect, warning others against us. You have, behind our back, dealt as a friend with those from whom we have been obliged to separate for reasons of conscience and in order to remain faithful to principles and doctrines confessed by your Synod together with ours. . . .

And so we write this letter . . . asking you in all earnestness that you review your course of these last years as in the sight of God and retrace your steps before the night comes.¹⁵¹

To his credit or to his detriment, Theodore Graebner was able to change his opinions as developments warranted. Some regarded those changes as the mark of developing views and the evidence of theological honesty; others witnessed them with growing alarm and as the bellwether of an irreversible intersynodical schism.¹⁵² Graebner reacted defensively to his critics, predicted and helped bring about the dissolution of the Synodical Conference, and all but denied his own membership in that body.

¹⁵⁰Edmund Reim, “Dr. Graebner and the *Lutheran Witness*,” *Quartalschrift* 46 (April 1949): 131.

¹⁵¹S. C. Ylvisaker to Theodore Graebner, November 5, 1947; Graebner papers, box 70.

¹⁵²Michael Henrichs, “Theodore Graebner and the Norwegian Synod 1943-1950,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 73 (Summer 2000): 97-98.