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## At the Milestone.<sup>1)</sup>

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“It may be out of place to enter minutely upon the history of the Missouri Synod, the greatest and most important of the Lutheran synods of our country; but there is one fact that I do not like to pass over in silence, — I must at least suggest it, — *viz.*, I see before me no more striking instance of the blessing which God bestows on men’s faithfulness than this very Missouri Synod. If it had not with such iron tenacity held to its confession of the pure doctrine; if it had not offered such trenchant testimony, and had not fought against each and every deviation from the path which it had recognized to be the only true way; if it had shown itself more yielding in its church-polity (*Praxis*) than in its teaching; if it had adapted itself in ever so small a measure to the views of our rather impressionable age, it would *not* have achieved the results which it may now claim. The Missouri Synod has brought into captivity its every thought to the obedience of Christ, and that attitude of hers the Lord has rewarded. In the view of the earliest and the present members of the Missouri Synod the glory of God and the unalloyed truth of His Word, which has found its clearest expression in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, is to be esteemed more highly than the favor of men and airy human figments. If the Lord God had not taken pity upon the Lutheran Church in America by placing the Missouri Synod in its midst, we would to-day be an insignificant band, perhaps still bearing the name ‘Lutheran,’ but, for the rest, offering ourselves as an open pasturage for foxes and other game. If I call to mind what the grace of God has accomplished through the Missourians, I cannot join those who are barking at them. It is my conviction that the Missourians ascribe their success to the mercy of God, and not to

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1) From *Ebenezer*, a memorial volume commemorative of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Missouri Synod, just published by Concordia Publishing House.

their labor (*Fleiss*), no matter how proud they may be of it. May the Lord bless the sturdy Saxons, and cause their salt to work with increasing power in the leaven of the American Church" — thus wrote the *Pilger durch Welt und Kirche*,<sup>2)</sup> a General Council publication, more than thirty-five years ago, at a time when the world in both hemispheres was reverberating with the gravest indictments and open abuse and scorn of the Missouri Synod because of its doctrinal position.

It is not only the complimentary features of the words just cited — the frank and generous acknowledgment of our Synod's worth — that delights the hearts of Missourians and makes them truly thankful for this testimony, which differs greatly from what they usually hear about themselves, nor are those words prized by Missourians as a glad surprise and a hopeful sign because of the source from which they emanated, but the sentiments voiced by our unknown friend are valued, above all, for the happy precision with which they state the true cause of whatever there is of permanent value to the Church of Jesus Christ in the work and example of the Missouri Synod. Those words were not written merely to tickle the vanity of Missourians: they express the mind of Missourians in a manner that could hardly be improved upon. And — praise God! — they are as true to-day as at the time when they were first published. Therefore they deserve to be called to remembrance.

As the reminiscence of Missourians in these anniversary days goes back to the humble, plodding, but patiently persistent work of the pioneers of our Synod, as it tries to measure the odds against which that work was begun, and the baffling difficulties from within and without that attended its progress, the spirit of conceit and the inclination to self-flattery, which certainly can crop out in Missourians as well as in other children of Adam, becomes utterly subdued. Human agencies were employed in this remarkable task of three-quarters of a century, and much has occurred in that period that was purely human and should remain mercifully consigned to oblivion; but the work itself was not of men; it was the Lord's doing. There have been noble instances of passionate zeal in the cause of the Lord among us. Great Christian characters, men who threw themselves whole-heartedly into the work before them, glad to spend themselves and be spent, grace the pages of our synodical record. But there have also been many instances of indifference, sluggishness, neglect of golden opportunities, lack of cooperation, unbrotherly conduct, unfaithfulness. The splendid spiritual equip-

2) Vol. 5, p. 370.

ment provided for the Missouri Synod by her pure teaching and the abundant efforts for thorough indoctrination of her members, old and young, which her teachers have incessantly made for three-quarters of a century, would justify the expectation of greater things than those that were actually accomplished. The material resources which a bounteous God has supplied to our constituents in ever-increasing measure during this long period have never been remotely exhausted in the exercise of our stewardship. The jubilee balance-sheet of our synodical activities will, in a fearless and searching audit, show an excess of liabilities that have not been met. It would be quite easy to turn our rejoicing into mourning by dwelling at length on the shady side of our past record.

In view of all the weakness, indecision, pusillanimity that we have allowed to dominate our counsels and paralyze our endeavors in the past, it would not have been surprising if we had been overthrown in the numerous conflicts in which we have had to engage.

The one great fact that stands out silent and grand, compelling us to humility on the one hand, and grateful wonder on the other, has been the unwearying kindness of the Lord, who chose to work His great signs and wonders with such poor, defective tools, guiding us onward in spite of our inclinations to err, and supporting us even under the chastisements which His merciful pedagogy had to apply to our refractory and truant spirits. In the symphony of our jubilant melodies, accordingly, there is heard a deep note of sorrow. We rejoice with trembling. Our song is the restored exiles' glad song of deliverance in the days of the old covenant. It starts in a minor key, and continues in that while it dwells on the theme of self. It rises to stately and majestic chords only as it weaves its choral around the everlasting love in heaven and the mercy that was renewed every morning:—

*If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,  
Let Israel now say;  
If it had not been the Lord who was on our side  
When men rose up against us,  
Then they had swallowed us up quick  
When their wrath was kindled against us;  
Then the waters had overwhelmed us,  
The stream had gone over our soul.  
BLESSED BE THE LORD,  
Who hath not given us as a prey to their teeth.  
Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers;  
The snare is broken, and we are escaped.  
OUR HELP IS IN THE NAME OF THE LORD,  
WHO MADE HEAVEN AND EARTH.3)*

Therefore our slogan on this anniversary is:—

EBEN-EZER,<sup>4)</sup>

HITHERTO HATH THE LORD HELPED US.

*Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us,*

*But unto Thy name give glory,*

*For Thy mercy, and for Thy truth's sake.<sup>5)</sup>*

As we pass on to the tasks of the new days before us, we recall our unknown friend's remark about faithful adherence to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions. No student of the history of the Lutheran Church can escape the conviction that her seasons of vigor and success were the times when her confessional consciousness was thoroughly aroused, and her sons fought and toiled in loyal devotion under the banner that was unfurled at Augsburg, in 1530, and again at Kloster Bergen, in 1580. Her periods of weakness, on the other hand, have always been those when her children made light of their confessional heritage and were bartering away their birthright in the Lord's family for a pot of lentils. This is in accordance with the Lord's own prediction: "Therefore, thus saith the Lord, If thou return, then will I bring thee again, and thou shalt stand before Me; and if thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as My mouth. Let them return unto thee, but return not thou unto them. And I will make thee unto this people a fenced brazen wall; and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee to save thee and to deliver thee, saith the Lord. And I will deliver thee out of the hand of the wicked, and I will redeem thee out of the hand of the terrible."<sup>6)</sup>

Let the generation of Missourians to whose hands the future work of our Synod will be committed, remember that doctrinal and confessional fidelity and a church polity which strives honestly to measure up to the professed principles is the only reliable basis of

4) 1 Sam. 7, 12.

5) Ps. 115, 1.

6) The text has been rendered much more strikingly, and withal quite pertinently, though not so literally, by Luther: "Darum spricht der Herr also: Wo du dich zu mir haeltst, so will ich mich zu dir halten, und [du] sollst mein Prediger bleiben. Und wo du die Frommen lehrest sich sondern von den boesen Leuten, so sollst du mein Lehrer sein. Und ehe du solltest zu ihnen fallen, so muessen sie eher zu dir fallen; denn ich habe dich wider dies Volk zur ehernen Mauer gemacht; ob sie wider dich streiten, sollen sie dir doch nichts anhaben; denn ich bin bei dir, dass ich dir helfe und dich errette, spricht der Herr. Und ich will dich auch erretten aus der Hand der Boesen und erloesen aus der Hand der Tyrannen." Jer. 15, 19—21.

our hope for future success, while the opposite course spells decay and ruin, slow it may be, but sure. "Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the Lord: look unto the rock whence ye are hewn,"<sup>7)</sup> said the prophet to the epigones of a great past in his day. To do the works of the fathers we must have the spirit of the fathers: that is the only genealogical trait that is worth something; otherwise we shall, like the Pharisees of old, vainly boast our descent from Abraham, only to have our claim dashed and to be told that God can do without us, and is able to raise up children unto the father of the faithful out of stones.

Let no one become dismayed at the criticism that the Missouri fathers were a stern, unloving set of fighters, who forgot the gentler aspects of Christianity over their devotion to rigorous discipline. None that raise this charge come into court with clean hands. The love that can see some one err and not tell him of it is no love. The mind that can yield to an equivocal peace by which plain truth is sacrificed is not truly liberal, but fatally narrow and bigoted because it exhibits all its generous qualities only to the side which opposes truth. With all their aggression and rigor and exclusiveness the men who built up the Missouri Synod were true Christian gentlemen; for though they minced no words when they spoke on any issue of the day, they spoke the truth, and they spoke it in love.<sup>8)</sup> We shall take up their testimony and pass it on. It is possible, perhaps, to present it occasionally in a more pleasing form than it was rendered in the controversial stress and storm of the past, and if we can, we ought to do so, and prove ourselves as our fathers strove to be, truth-loving and truth-telling Christian gentlemen. But that will not change the essence of the testimony: we, too, shall not be able to do more than speak the truth in love, and leave it to the Lord to make our testimony acceptable to men and fruitful. We shall strive to offer golden apples in silver baskets rather than on cabbage-leaves; but our greatest ambition and incessant endeavor must be to have the golden apples of truth to offer in abundance. "We can become wiser than our forefathers only when we have mastered their knowledge and experience, and add our own thereto, but never by obliterating the past, and starting upon the career in the world unprepared to meet and avoid its dangers, and unfitted to take advantage of the opportunities it offers us. . . .

"It is needless now to conceal the divisions that are apparent

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7) Is. 51, 1.

8) Eph. 4, 15.

in the Lutheran Church. . . . — they do exist; and all our lamentations, etc., cannot heal them; they are the legitimate developments of the past; let us rather study them in the light of past experience, in order that we may discover the mistakes then made, which prepared the way for such divisions, and endeavor to heal them at their very root. Let us no longer make the attempt 'to agree to disagree,' but honestly ask for the old paths, diligently study 'the faith once delivered to the saints,' so that we may intelligently and 'earnestly contend for it'; let us in this way seek to become united in faith and practise, not from motives of policy, but as an honest conviction of duty." 9) To these excellent sentiments, so rarely voiced in the body whence they emanated, we cordially subscribe. They were expressed by an honored member of the late General Synod; they have been the avowed policy of our fathers; they are our own, and we point to them if any inquire of us, What of the future?

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