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Confessionalism of the Missouri Synod.

1. INTRODUCTORY.

From the history of those conflicts our descendants will have to form their conviction as to which side had a right to shout, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!"

PRESIDENT P. BRAND, *in Opening Address at Brooklyn, N. Y., May 4, 1898.*¹⁾

A current definition of confessionalism runs: "Confessionalism is a strict adherence to the confessions of some particular church or sect; it is the conforming in teaching and preaching with scrupulous fidelity to the letter and spirit of the confessional writings of some particular division of the Christian Church. Lutheran confessionalism is the strict adherence to the Lutheran confessions in letter and spirit."²⁾ But for the omission of "and practise" after "teaching and preaching" the definition would be altogether satisfactory. This omission accounts for an illogical division of the subject of "confessionalism," or rather of "confessionalists," to which we shall refer later.

Men of judgment and extensive observation outside of the Missouri Synod, when asked to name the one feature which distinguishes this Synod from others, will invariably name the peculiar type of confessionalism that controls the activities of this body. Not infrequently the statement about the Missouri Synod's confessionalism is qualified by some such phrase as "hyper-" or "extreme." There are situations which few Missourians, if any, are spared, when it is anything rather than a joy and delight to be a Missourian. For to be a Missourian often means to be declared an ecclesiastical and social misfit, to be forced into isolation, and — insult being added to injury — to be told that the isolation was

1) Eastern Dist. Rep., Mo. Syn., 1898, p. 14.

2) Dr. J. Nicum, in *Luth. Cyclop.*, p. 129.

self-inflicted: it is due to the exaggerated forms which the confessionalism of Missourians is said to assume — the confessional overemphasis. It is believed that this feature makes the Missouri Synod a permanent and hopeless incongruity in the complex of the Lutheran organizations in the world. It is, therefore, pertinent and in the interest both of Missourians and Lutherans in general to inquire into the causes, the quality, and the scope and aim of the confessionalism of the Missouri Synod, and to ascertain whether it is at all possible to remove the friction which is evidently caused by the confessional attitude of the Missouri Synod.

It is also opportune to attempt such an inquiry in view of the fact that the Missouri Synod is on the eve of the Diamond Jubilee of its existence. Three quarters of a century is too long an extent of time to be spanned by the conscious and responsible part of a single man's life. There is no Missourian living who has been an eye- and ear-witness of the confessional struggles of the Missouri Synod, who could recount the significant incidents and evolutions of this struggle and interpret from his personal knowledge its lessons of warning and encouragement. Neither is there such a person living among the opponents of the Missouri Synod. The study of this subject, at least in its initial stage, must be a study of the records of the past. To examine these records is, to Missourians, a sacred duty and a beneficial exercise. The men who will be doing the work of the Missouri Synod in 1921 will be guided to a more intelligent and satisfactory estimate of the distinctive character of that work, if they learn to understand why it was that a handful of men felt constrained to organize within the Lutheran Church of America a separate body which came to be called "The Missouri Synod." Present-day convictions of Missourians that have a bearing on their activities as churchmen are unquestionably determined by principles settled upon at that early time. What happened at Chicago on Monday, April 26, 1847, marks the beginning of a permanent policy in American Lutheranism.

2. THE CAUSES.

When our Synod started on its career in America, everybody was saying, "There is a new sect come into existence."

DR. WALTHER, at Fort Dodge, Iowa, August 21, 1879.³⁾

Without any attempt at facetiousness the dictum of the Sage of Verulam may be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the subject of confessionalism: Some men are born confessionalists, some achieve

3) Iowa Dist. Rep., Mo. Syn., 1879, p. 13.

confessionalism, and some have confessionalism thrust upon them. The sense is this: Conditions of church-life have been, and can be created, which render confessionalism the natural element, the atmosphere, in which a person spends his life. The thousands of Missourians who form the later generations of the Synod's membership enjoy this privilege: not that they are confessionalists by reason of their physical birth, but the conditions of their church-life that meet them from earliest infancy and in which they grow up are regulated by such a pronounced regard for the Confessions of their Church that they come to believe confessionalism to be the normal status of a Lutheran — which, indeed, it is.

It was different with the founders of the Missouri Synod. They hailed from parts of Germany in which, owing to the ravages of pietism and rationalism, Lutheran confessional fidelity had become a rarity. Since the union-edict of Frederick III in 1817, confessional Lutheranism was even persecuted, not only in Prussia, but also in all those countries which had adopted the mistaken policy of the Prussian king and his ministers. Prof. Guenther writes: "The oppression of true Lutherans in Saxony for their faith's sake was simply appalling. In His *Life of Buenger* Walther describes the horrible condition of the state church of Saxony: 4) ' . . . The unconditional pledge of adherence to the Book of Concord was at that time nothing but an empty comedy, and of the same order were the most important ordinances of the state church: they were actual and manifest repudiations of the Confessions of the Church, which, nevertheless, had been accepted under oath, and they proved plainly that only on the basis of the moral principles of Jesuitism could the assertion be made that the Saxon state church was still a Lutheran, hence an orthodox church, for the reason, namely, that in it the confessions were still officially recognized.' " The sacred acts of Baptism, Absolution, Communion were performed according to formularies that scandalized conscientious Lutherans. The religious instruction of Lutheran children in the state schools had a practically paganizing tendency. Separatist meetings of confessional Lutherans for worship were placed under an interdict by the government, and when they occurred and were discovered, had to be broken up by the police. Permission for organizing a Free Church, independent of state control, could not be obtained.5)

Under these precarious, provoking conditions the determined,

4) See *Lutheraner*, 1882, p. 62 f.

5) *Lutheraner*, 1888, p. 138.

unyielding confessional spirit of the founders of the Missouri Synod was formed, and given its rugged, stubborn, tenacious features. The storm-tossed oak becomes gnarly and tough; it lacks the graces of the tropical palm. But the sterner stuff of which it is made, renders it a stalwart article, fit for harder usages. In those days of anguish the thought, too, of emigrating to America began to be entertained by the Saxon Lutherans. "How gladly," writes Walther, "would the believing Lutheran pastors and laymen have surrendered everything, if they could have obtained the permission to separate from the grievously corrupted and apostate state church and to organize as a Lutheran Free Church! But it was absolutely hopeless to think of such an official grant at that time. They saw, accordingly, that their only way of escape from the tyranny to which their consciences were subjected, which became more intolerable as time wore on, and which threatened to stifle their life of faith, was to emigrate to a country in which religious liberty was guaranteed." 6)

As a body pledged to, and to a considerable degree trained in, fidelity to the Lutheran Confessions they landed at St. Louis in 1839. Their reputation as "strait-laced orthodoxists" had preceded them, and hostile journalists had prepared the mind of the public to look upon them with considerable disfavor. 7) The faithlessness of their leader, which was exposed soon after their arrival in America, lent color to the evil reports that had been set afloat against them. Diffidence and doubts regarding the righteousness of their cause, the justifiableness of their emigration enterprise, in fact, their Christian and Lutheran status, became rife in their own ranks. Great searchings of heart, involving every member of the colony, took place on the banks of the Obrazos River in Missouri in the spring and summer of 1839. In all seriousness the question was, even formally, debated among them, whether they really were a spiritual priesthood of believers, vested with the rights and prerogatives of Christians, and whether the Church of God existed among them. Next to the divine instruction which they drew from the Word of God in those days, it was the testimony of the Lutheran Confessions and compelling reasons drawn from them in able arguments that stablished their faltering hearts and revived their drooping spirits. More than ever it appeared necessary to them to furnish to everybody whom they might be able

6) *Lutheraner*, l. c.

7) See account in *Young Lutherans' Magazine*, 1920, p. 87 ff.

to reach by their testimony the evidence that they were and meant to be Lutherans, sincerely loyal to the Book of Concord. To extend their testimony and render it more emphatic, they started their first church-paper in 1844 and called it *Der Lutheraner*. Their editor, Walther, explained the object of the publication: "The conviction that it is our duty to render an account to our fellow-citizens as to what is believed and taught in our Church, and what are the guiding principles of our action, has induced the undersigned, together with several brethren in Missouri and Illinois, ministers and laymen, to publish a paper with the above title. The object of this paper shall be: 1. to acquaint men with the doctrine, the treasures, and the history of the Lutheran Church; 2. to furnish the evidence that this Church is not to be classed as one of the Christian sects, but is the old true Church of Jesus Christ on earth, which has not by any means become extinct, and never can become extinct, because of the promise of Christ: 'Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world'; 3. to show how as a true Lutheran a person can hold the correct faith, lead a Christian life, suffer patiently, and die saved; 4. finally, to expose, refute, and warn against the false and misleading teachings current at the present time, and in particular, to reveal those who falsely call themselves Lutherans, and under this name are disseminating misbelief, unbelief, and fanatical views and thereby excite among the members of other parties the worst prejudices against our Church. — Not a few, when reading this, will deny our ability to achieve the aim which we have fixed for ourselves, or will fear that our paper will breathe the spirit of intolerance, and thus sustain and feed hatred among people of different beliefs. Our answer to the first objection is merely this: We perceive assuredly more keenly than any one else our lack of ability for discharging in their full scope the duties of an editor of a Christian paper. However, we know that in divine matters not great learning and eloquence, but a real live knowledge of the saving truth and a simple testimony in its behalf are paramount for serving the brethren. Besides, we intend to let the most genial teachers of our Church, especially Luther, speak to our readers. . . . As regards the other objection, that will soon be removed by a careful examination of a few issues of our paper. We had been caught ourselves for a considerable time in all sorts of errors, but God was patient with us and with great long-suffering led us into the way of the truth. Remembering this, we shall practise patience towards our erring fellow-men and by the grace of God shall re-

frain from all sinful judging and condemning. We shall not attack the erring person, but rather his error. We shall not deport ourselves as people who claim to be the only Lutherans and to possess the truth alone, but we shall bear this testimony only that God has done great things for us, and has guided us to a living knowledge of the only saving truth." 8)

These men, then, had achieved confessionalism in many a severe spiritual conflict, and had confessionalism thrust upon them by the force of circumstances that confronted them upon their arrival in America. Walther's serial articles in the first four issues of his paper "On the Name 'Lutheran'" follow the scope indicated in his preface.9) Actually the Saxon spokesmen for a confessional Lutheranism who had come to America buoyed up by the sure expectation that here their tribulations would be over and they would be recognized and appreciated for what they were, found themselves cruelly disappointed in their primary hope. They had to fight for recognition as Lutherans, and the most galling element in their disappointment was that their own brethren in name denied their Lutheran character. Slowly and reluctantly American Lutherans came to admit, with more or less serious reservations, that the Missourians are Lutherans.

Walther said: "When our Synod started on its career in America, everybody was saying, 'There is a new sect come into existence.' For the Lutheran doctrine was not known. Perhaps not ten copies of the Book of Concord besides our own could be located, and among those who were called theologians we could not find one who had read, much less studied it. If we had not been able at that time to prove by means of our confessional writings that ours is the Lutheran doctrine, we should have had to submit to being called a sect. If we had said, 'We are Lutherans,' our opponents would have replied: 'You misunderstand the Holy Scriptures; yours is not the understanding that Luther had.' But we were able to say: 'Observe that we mean nothing else than what is recorded in our Book of Concord. Prove to us that we are departing from it in a single point, and we shall quit calling ourselves Lutherans.' Men had to see that we could justly appeal to the Symbolical Books, and by the grace of God it was brought about that all who sincerely desired to be Lutherans united with us."

8) *Lutheraner*, 1844, p. 1.

9) *Ibid.*, p. 2 ff. 5 ff. 9 ff. 13 ff. This article is an American Lutheran classic, and deserves to be reproduced in English.

Nor was the task of winning congregations to affiliation with the Missouri Synod a less difficult one. In the paper from which we have just quoted and which was read at the first convention of the newly organized Iowa District, Walther said: "Our beloved congregations, too, which at first had regarded us with distrust, finally said: 'These men are offering us nothing but what we find in our Catechism.' That is what convinced them that we were true Lutherans. May this District, then, also consider fidelity to the Confessions its principal duty, as our fathers did."¹⁰

The first and the unkindest cut received by the Saxon confessionalists was dealt them by dear brethren, fellow-immigrants from Prussia, who had settled near Buffalo, N. Y. Their leader had been admonished by the Saxons because of hierarchical tendencies which he had manifested in his teaching and ministration. He induced the synod which he had organized to address to the Saxons these vehement strictures:—

"The present synod unanimously declares that the ministers, Walther, Loeber, and their accomplices, are living in false doctrine as regards the sacred office of the ministry, and the call thereunto, the Church and the Office of the Keys, Church Government, and the Spiritual Priesthood; and that from these false teachings and errors manifest sins and crimes have arisen and are still arising from which they refuse to desist in spite of all instructions and admonitions that we have addressed to them for five years. We declare furthermore that they are wilful and proud sinners who in spite of all Christian exhortation have increased in sins and become strong in crime. Therefore, we have to regard them as wilful false teachers and manifest, zealous sinners, until they turn, repent, and sincerely seek reconciliation with us."¹¹

The opposition which the Missouri Synod had to experience for its confessionalism from the older Lutheran bodies in America had its source and basis in plain ignorance. It is chiefly these bodies that Walther has in mind in the remarks he made to the Iowa District in 1879. Lest any one imagine that he said too much when he declared: "The Lutheran doctrine was not known. Perhaps not ten copies of the Book of Concord," etc., we would here introduce an able Lutheran spokesman outside of the Missouri Synod, Dr. Adolph Spaeth, who has described the state of

10) Iowa Dist. Rep., 1879, p. 13 f.

11) *Hirttenbrief d. Buffalo-Syn.*; cited in Eastern Dist. Rep., Mo. Syn., 1901, p. 18.

American Lutheranism prior to the rise of the Missouri Synod for the greatest Protestant Encyclopedia of the world — the German *Protestantische Realenzyklopaedie*. He says: —

“It is undeniable that in this period [of retrogression] that full consciousness of adherence to the confessional basis which is indispensable to a free church was weakened and shaken. There were evidences of indifferentism, subjectivism, and, occasionally, of outspoken rationalism. In 1792 the Constitution of the Pennsylvania Synod was changed in such a way as to drop all mention of the Lutheran Confessions. The Constitution thus amended two years later became the basis of that adopted by the New York Ministerium. Still the pastors at their ordination continued to sign a guarantee in which they promised to keep their teaching in harmony with the Word of God and the Symbolical Books. After the death of Kunze a change essentially for the worse took place. At the head of the New York Ministerium there now came to be Dr. Frederick Henry Quitmann, a pupil of Semler, and a declared devotee of vulgar rationalism. Under his influence the old Lutheran Catechisms, hymnals, and liturgies were supplanted by others, alleged to better ‘meet the needs of the rising generation.’ As early as 1797 the strange resolution was passed: ‘Whereas a close union is taking place between the Episcopal and the Lutheran Church, and the consistory, on account of the identity of their doctrine and the near relationship of their discipline, will never recognize a Lutheran Church using the English language exclusively, when erected at a place where the members can take part in the Episcopal service,’ etc. This resolution, with the passing of which it is likely that the Germans’ love of their language in their antagonism to the English had very much to do, was formally rescinded seven years later. A parallel instance occurred in Pennsylvania, where a series of resolutions was passed in 1819 and 1822, which openly labored for a formal union with the Reformed. Also in Pennsylvania the hymnals and liturgies, in particular, evidenced the decline of churchly and confessional consciousness. The very first printed agenda of 1786 showed a decided retrogression, compared to the one of 1748 which had existed only in manuscript. True, the hymnal of 1786, in the compilation of which Muehlenberg still cooperated and for which he wrote the preface, still contained a goodly number of the sturdy old Lutheran hymns in good texts, uncorrupted except in a few instances. But even in this hymnal there is found an unduly large number of the hymns of Halleian Pietism which were of a rather subjective tenor. Occa-

sionally the editor, Dr. Helmuth, has, moreover, taken the liberty to make changes in the text of hymns by Paul Gerhardt, John Heermann, and others, that were entirely unnecessary and bore a dogmatic significance. The agenda of 1818 signals a thorough defection from the beautiful, ancient order of service of the Lutheran Church and, what is worse than all, a defection also from the Lutheran doctrine and confessions in the formulas for Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Ordination. And the so-called union hymnal of 1817 which preceded this agenda and which was highly recommended by the Synods of Pennsylvania, New York, and North Carolina, is one of the sorriest instances of the decadence in hymnology which prevailed at that time, also in Germany. The sturdy old hymns have become disfigured to such an extent that it is almost impossible to recognize them. Only one hymn of Luther, 'Out of the Depths I Cry to Thee,' was received into this hymnal. . . .

"In many instances German national consciousness and love of the German language were much stronger during this period than the churchly and Lutheran consciousness. Even the venerable Frederick Christian Schaefer, of New York, in a letter addressed to the Pennsylvania Synod in 1819, insisted that 'as Lutherans and Reformed were united in one Evangelical Church in Germany, the true Germans in America ought in this respect to follow the example of the Germans in Germany. . . .

"In the General Synod . . . there are observed, from the very beginning, two antagonistic currents, which at first exist peaceably alongside of one another, as if by a tacit compromise, but finally had to turn against one another and engage in a hot contest for the supremacy. On the one side there is a conservative element, the so-called Symbolists (Confessionalists) who seek to retain, though with great timidity and restraint, not only the name, but also the spirit and faith of the Lutheran Church. On the other side stands 'American Lutheranism,' which has lost contact with the Lutheran spirit, and, as far as it still strives to be positively Christian, is permeated through and through with Puritanic and Methodist influences. During the first twenty-five years of the General Synod this latter element was decidedly the dominant one. In the original Constitution (of the General Synod) the Confessions were utterly ignored. However, at the founding of its theological seminary at Gettysburg the General Synod decreed that at this institution 'the fundamental doctrines of Holy Scripture as they are contained in the Augsburg Confession are to be taught

in the English and the German language.' At their induction into office the professors had to declare under oath: 'I believe that the Augsburg Confession and the Catechisms of Luther are a comprehensive and correct declaration of the fundamental doctrines of God's Word.' However, what this teacher's pledge really meant, or rather what it did not mean, was unreservedly expressed when the leading professor at this institution, Dr. S. S. Schmucker, said: 'If the professors were to inculcate upon their students the antiquated views of the Symbolical Books, . . . they would commit a breach of confidence towards those who placed them in office, and would act contrary to the entire scope and plan of the institution.' There is no doubt that in thus interpreting and applying the paragraph relating to doctrine, Dr. Schmucker at that time had the majority in the General Synod on his side. And in the course of years this man, who had received his own theological training at the Presbyterian seminary at Princeton, educated an entire generation of 'Lutheran' pastors. The spirit which he had nursed to maturity is best characterized by a letter of 1845, addressed to the Evangelical Church of Germany to which an appeal was made for contributions to the Gettysburg Seminary. The committee in question declares in the name of the General Synod: 'In the majority of our ecclesiastical principles we stand on a joint basis with the union church of Germany. The distinctive doctrines of the old Lutheran and the Reformed Churches we do not regard as essential. . . . Luther's peculiar view of the corporeal presence of the Lord in the Supper has long been dropped by the majority of our ministers.'" 12)

Small wonder, when one bears in mind this unfortunate state of affairs, that voices of strong dissent should be raised within the circle of these older Lutheran bodies against the strict confessionalism of the Missouri Synod. The *Lutheran Observer* admitted that *Der Lutheraner* was the best edited paper of the American Lutheran Church, but added: "We have little sympathy with the exclusive, orthodox spirit which *Der Lutheraner* advocates." 13) In the *Missionary*, February, 1849, Dr. Passavant wrote:—

"We have a great controversy with our brethren in the Missouri Synod because of their exclusiveness and their unpardonable one-sidedness, which in many instances is the cause why both they and their Church are evil spoken of and their usefulness is materially hindered."

12) PRE3 14, 192-4.

13) Cited in East. Dist. Rep., 1898, p. 14.

In 1854 the *Observer* wrote: "It is true, there are a few small parties which call themselves Lutheran, but they are not of us, and there is no hope that the Missourians or the Buffalonians and other small societies will ever become wiser in their generation. But it may be expected that their children and children's children will outgrow the narrow prejudices of their fathers and become intelligent and useful Christians. (*Sic!*) As was stated, we do not regard these parties as Lutherans; they have stolen a part of Luther's livery, but they have not Luther's spirit and would be disavowed by the great Reformer, if he were still on earth. . . .

"They are a sort of spiritual Ishmaelites; their proper place is the Roman Church, where men believe what they are taught, as the Church believes, and not what the Bible and the Holy Spirit teaches them." ¹⁴⁾

On November 1, 1862, the *Herald* wrote:—

"Among those whose extinction would be gain belong undoubtedly *Der Lutheraner* and *Lehre und Wehre*, if these publications will not cease functioning as executioners."

And once more the *Observer*, in December, 1864, delivers the following opinion:—

"There are many things among the Lutherans of the Missouri Synod which are to be profoundly regretted, namely, their bigotry, their exclusiveness, and their extreme high-churchism. They have committed a deplorable error by placing themselves on a hyper-Lutheran basis. . . . Unlike ourselves they sadly offend by making human speculations on matters which are not revealed by inspiration a part of the creed of their Church. They err in refusing to sympathize with the Christians of this country, and especially in declining to enter into an intimate ecclesiastical communion with the American Lutheran Church and its General Synod. It is strange that Christian people who come to live in this country fail to see the hand of God in the type of Christianity which characterizes the Church of this country, and that they are unable to hear the voice of Providence which calls them to join the ranks of the sacramental hosts that are led in this country by the great Captain." ¹⁵⁾

Expressions of similar tenor might be submitted, extending to more recent times, but the present situation as regards Lutheran confessionalism in America may be regarded as summed up by

14) Cited in East. Dist. Rep., 1901, p. 18.

15) Cited in East. Dist. Rep., 1898, p. 15.

Dr. Nicum. After giving the definition of Lutheran confessionalism which was cited at the beginning of this article, he proceeds: "It is evident that, from this definition, two kinds of confessionalism result, or are at least possible, to wit: 1. A conservative, healthy, and evangelical confessionalism, which, while carefully guarding the letter and terms of the Confessions, lays no less stress upon their spirit and their historic interpretation; and 2. an extreme, unhealthy, and unevangelical confessionalism, which, whilst it may claim to interpret the Confessions in the spirit of their authors and in their historical connection, lays, however, greater stress upon the terms used, and gives to the documents an interpretation that is neither warranted by the context nor intended by their authors. Extreme confessionalists are apt to go beyond the Confessions and draw illegitimate inferences from them." The reference in this last remark, as is seen from the author's expansion of his thought, is to the Missouri Synod. Whether his division can stand and continue to be cited as authority, and whether the characterization of the second type of Lutheran Confessionalism is just, an examination of the quality of true confessionalism will have to show.

D.
