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A Study of the Influence of C. F. W. Walther on the Norwegian Synod

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A STUDY OF THE INFLUENCE OF C. F. W. WALTHER

ON THE NORWEGIAN SYNOD

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by

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Norwegian Synod, which existed from 1853 until 1917, was a confessional Lutheran church body. The early leaders had received their theological training in the state church of Norway which in the middle of the nineteenth century was a confessional Lutheran church. Like other churches on the American frontier the synod experienced its share of problems. In the new land the leaders had to find answers to these problems without the help of the state church. These crises brought the Norwegian leaders into contact with Dr. C. F. W. Walther and the Missouri Synod. Several interpretations of the relationship between Walther and the Norwegian Synod have given different views of how much power he yielded. Some historians praise the relationship between the two synods while others view the relationship as detrimental to the Norwegians. This paper will look at some of the interpretations of Walther's influence and also the strength of confessional Lutheranism among Norwegian-Americans during four periods: the time until 1860, the period during the slavery issue, the period during the election controversy and the period after Walther's death.

II. THE IMMIGRANTS THROUGH 1860

The relations between these two synods involved two groups of people who emigrated for different reasons, lived in different locations, had different backgrounds but shared a similar faith. The Saxons who emigrated to America left under the leadership of Martin Stephan, a man whom they quickly deposed from his position. They eventually recovered from this early setback and eventually organized with other German Lutherans into the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and other States. The Germans in this synod, both clergy and laity, had a strong desire to maintain their Lutheran orthodoxy in their new surroundings. In America they lived primarily in Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Missouri.

Whereas the Saxon immigrants left primarily because of religious reasons, many of the Norwegians left for economic and social reasons. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Norwegian society had clearly defined classes. The upper class of merchants and landowners were only two percent of the population. About half of the people belonged to the middle class of farmers and craftsmen. The rest of the people were in the lower class of servants, day laborers and paupers. More than ninety percent of the people lived in rural areas. Money was limited primarily to cities so a barter system existed in rural areas.[1] Even as the century progressed, farming practices gave people little hope for a better future. Thus the lure of the freedom of America with its unlimited opportunities and wide expanse of land drew many Norwegians to the upper Midwest.

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[1]Odd S. Lovell, The Promise of America : A History of the Norwegian-American People (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 9.

The religious landscape in Norway prior to the large emigrations would have strong effects on relations between various Norwegian groups in the United States. The Lutheran state church of Norway faced challenges from the Haugeans and the Grundtvigians. Hans Nielsen Hauge and his movement emphasized piety and participation by the laity in religious services. Hauge worked for renewal within the church and did not seek to establish a separate church. He liked informal gatherings for spiritual edification. These gatherings went against the laws prohibiting conventicles. Gisle Johnson, a member of the faculty of the University of Christiana (Oslo) accepted Hauge's emphasis on piety but preferred clergy leadership over that of the laity. Another group was the Grundtvigians named after the Danish theologian, Nicolai F. S. Grundtvig. They were a liberal and more rationalistic faction within the church who denied the inspiration of Scripture and elevated the Apostles' Creed. Grundtvig's "matchless discovery" was that Christ was present in the congregation in his word when the people were at the baptismal font or the communion table but not in the same manner when the word was preached.[2]

The Lutheran Church of Norway became a stronghold of Lutheran orthodoxy especially at the middle of the nineteenth century. With orthodoxy came the problem of people feeling unattached to the church which led to interest in the Haugean movement. Members of the clergy were part of the cultured elite in Norwegian society which led some of the laity to resent them. This dislike of the clergy created problems in the new land. Many of the immigrants did not want clergy around them except for the special functions of the church such as baptism, confirmation and the like. The presence of pastors and their families with their refined manners, speech and dress was a continual source of irritation for some of the immigrants. Others even felt that the clergy threatened their new freedom. The presence of a member of the clergy reminded the immigrants of

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[2] Ibid., 59.

their lowly origin which they had hoped to leave behind. Efforts by the clergy to establish proper church order was viewed as a way of keeping the "common people" in place.[3] Some of the immigrants lived from 1825 until 1843 without a pastor. They continued their practice of meeting in people's homes.

The appearance of the first Norwegian pastor was in 1844 with the Rev. J. W. C. Dietrichson. He came to America in 1844 when he was thirty-three years old. He was interested in missionary work among the non-Christian peoples and was somewhat leery of working with Norwegians on American soil. He moved to Wisconsin because "the holy Word we have in the Bible drove him to visit his countrymen in the distant West in order to preserve among them the Lutheran faith they brought with them from home."[4] With the arrival of Dietrichson, Norwegian Lutheran orthodoxy would begin to grow among the immigrants. Soon other pastors would come to the new land to care for the immigrants.

The changes occurring in the church in Norway could not be left behind for they were also present in America. Dietrichson came into contact with the work of Elling Eielsen who had great success bringing Haugeanism to the immigrants. Among the Norwegian immigrants would be two strands of Lutheranism - one was orthodox and high church while the other was pietistic and low church. Dietrichson symbolized the state church of Norway and its emphasis on order and ritual which many immigrants wanted to leave behind. Although the settlers desired normal pastors, they disliked the patronizing attitude of a pastor from the mother church who thought he was restoring order among the lost children. Eielsen was a strong proponent of a polity focused on the laity. Eielsen was the symbol of Haugeanism in America while Dietrichson was the symbol of the state

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[3] Peter A. Munch, "Authority and Freedom: Controversy in Norwegian-American Congregations," Norwegian American Studies, vol. 28 (Northfield, MN: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1979), 21.

[4] Lovell, 57

church transplanted from Norway.[5] This clash of ideology would last for about fifty years and would cause problems for the Norwegian Synod in its attempts to remain orthodox. Despite the differences that existed between the Norwegian groups and their various religious practices, eventually a strong sense of nationalism would bring them together in one large denomination.

The Norwegian Synod was established on February 5, 1853, at Koshkonong, Wisconsin. The first attempt at forming a synod in 1851 failed the following year because part of the constitution contained statements expressing Grundtvigian views. The stumbling block was a sentence which stated that the church's doctrine was "what is revealed through the Word of God in our baptismal pact and in the Old and New Testament's canonical books." The phrase about the baptismal pact was eventually removed.[6] Another attempt in 1853 proved successful and a synod with six pastors and thirty-eight congregations was established. Like the Saxons, the Norwegians had problems writing a constitution for a church that had no relationship with the state as it did in Norway. They had to determine the relationship between the synod and the congregations and what duties the synod should have.

The first contact between the Norwegians and the Germans was with P. A. Rasmussen, a Haugean school teacher, who had come to America in 1850 to teach the children of immigrants. After a short stay in Wisconsin, he moved to Ft. Wayne, Indiana, to attend the "practical" seminary of the Missouri Synod from 1852 to 1854. He would later leave the Eielsen Synod and their Haugean beliefs for the Norwegian Synod only to later leave for the Anti-Missourians.[7]

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[5] Lowell Bolstad, "The Lay Activity Controversy Among Norwegian Lutherans in America," Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly 55 (1982): 151.

[6]Lovell, 59.

[7] E. Clifford Nelson and Eugene L. Fevold, The Lutheran Church Among

The first contact between the leaders of the synods came when the Norwegians needed to find a seminary. As the number of immigrants grew, so did the number of congregations. A few pastors came from Norway to help with the problem. Ulrik Vilhelm Koren, Laur. Larsen, and B. J. Muus came to America and became strong leaders within the synod. These leaders of the synods realized that they needed an establishment which could train both recent immigrants and men in future generations.

In 1855 Pastors Nils Brandt and Jacob Aal Otteson went on a journey to visit seminaries where they could potentially send Norwegian students. At that time there was no Norwegian seminary nor a seminary with a Norwegian faculty. Their journey included a visit to Columbus, Ohio. They felt there was some instability within the Joint Synod of Ohio with the toleration of vague or un-Lutheran views. Visiting the Martin Luther College of the Buffalo Synod in Buffalo, New York, gave a favorable impression of its orthodoxy, but there was the problem of Buffalo Synod's hierarchical interpretation of church and ministry. A visit to the "practical" seminary in Ft. Wayne gave a favorable impression, but the decision was made in 1857 to send the students to Concordia College in St. Louis.

The two pastors reported that their discovery was unspeakably precious with such a beloved and richly blessed nursery for their dear Lutheran Church. In their report of August 1857 to the Church Council of the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America they were impressed with both the seminary and the immigrants. They witnessed how almost every layman was familiar with the Augsburg Confession and "espouses Lutheran faith and doctrine with a love and fidelity that feels joy and honor in working for its preservation for himself and his, for the present and the future." Having received a classical Lutheran education in Christiana, they were enthusiastic about the instruction

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Norwegian-Americans Volume I 1825-1890 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960) 138-9.

they saw in St. Louis. The professors established a foundation in classical Lutheran theology with the Confessions as the basis of all dogmatic instruction accompanied by other well-known classical works in Lutheran dogmatics. The instruction they witnessed was similar to what they had received in Norway and wanted for future pastors in their synod. At the end of the report is an expression of joy in discovering the "genuine old-Lutheran spirit of this church" with which they felt comfortable.[8]

In October 1857, the Missouri Synod met in convention for ten days in Ft. Wayne. There was some discussion on the proposal by the Norwegians to send students to the St. Louis seminary. The Missouri leaders seemed to have been quite excited that they would be able to work with other orthodox Lutherans. The opening paragraph of a report in the *Neunter Synodal Bericht* reads "Unsere Synode hatte die Freude, mit der Synode der "Norwegischen evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche in Amerika" . . . in eine naehere bruederliche Gemeinschaft und Verbindung treten zu koennen." They were joyful that they could enter into a brotherly association with the Norwegians. Farther in the report the leaders state that

> The synod feels for their part the urgency of the Norwegian brothers to express their honest joy, that they have come to us with their brotherly confidence and that we are greatly obliged to you, and that we want to pray to God that he would inwardly unite us with you on the foundation of the one faith and confession always to the common task.[9]

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[8]Carl S. Meyer, Pioneers Find Friends, (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1963), 65.

[9]Neunter Synodal Bericht der allgemeinen deutschen Ev. Luth. Synode von Missouri, Ohio u. a. Staaten von Jahre 1857, (St. Louis: Druckeri der Synode, 1876), p. 356. The original text reads: "Die Synode fuehlte sich ihrerseits gedrungen, den norwegischen Bruedern ihre aufrichtige Freude darueber auszudruecken, dass sie uns mit ihrem bruederlichen Vertrauen entgegengekommen seien; dass wir uns daher vielmehr ihnen zu herzlichem Danke verpflichtet fuehlten, und dass wir mit ihnen Gott bitten wollen, Er wolle uns mit ihnen, auf dem Grunde des Einen Glaubens und Bekenntnisses, zum gemeinsamen Wirken immer inniger verbinden."

These words have a sense of excitement to them. With the problems Missouri had been experiencing with the Buffalo Synod, it was good to be able to develop some fellowship with other orthodox Lutherans. For the Norwegians, this relationship would have its good and bad points. The Norwegian Synod was the only Norwegian church body that was orthodox. Its ties with Missouri would be a great source of strength when dealing with the other pietistic Norwegians. At the same time, a strong dislike of the Missouri Synod would develop among many Norwegians who would later look down on the Norwegian Synod for this relationship. In 1857, though, there was much joy that two orthodox Lutheran churches had discovered each other.

The new relationship brought the first students to St. Louis in August 1858. Three students enrolled followed by another five in 1859. The professor for the Norwegian students, Professor Laur. Larsen from Luther College, described the students as being older than the German students and beyond the best stage for learning the subjects. He decided younger students needed to come to St. Louis to have more success at learning the languages.[10] Norwegian students continued to attend Concordia well into the 1870s and 1880s. The original agreement between the synods was for the Norwegians to attend Concordia until they established their own seminary. In 1876 Luther Seminary was established in Madison, Wisconsin, with a practical department. The theoretical department was started in 1878. This seminary remained in Madison until 1888 and was then transferred to St. Paul, Minnesota. With the opening of the Luther Seminary the number of Norwegian students at Concordia Seminary gradually declined.

The use of Concordia Seminary for training future pastors was an arrangement the leaders of the Norwegian Synod were pleased with. Prof. Laur. Larsen had received his

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[10] David T. Nelson, Luther College 1861 - 1961 (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1961), 39.

theological education at the university in Christiana from 1852 until 1855. Two highly respected instructors, Gisle Johnson and Carl Paul Caspari, were able to sweep away the last remnants of rationalism and usher in a return to Lutheran Orthodoxy.[11] The education at Concordia Seminary was similar to that which Larsen had received under those instructors. In lectures which he gave in 1866 in Norway, Herman Amberg Preus described the Missouri Synod in this way:

> Since its founding, the Missouri Synod has battled incessantly, with great courage as well as skill and fidelity to the confession, against all these more or less un-Lutheran synods as well as against the German Reformed and Catholic church bodies. Against them all it has unfurled the Lutheran banner in all its free, shining glory. Even though every hand has been raised against it, even though it has had to put up with mockery, derision, and persecution from every quarter, it has stayed unwaveringly with "God's Word and Luther's doctrine." And the Lord has not allowed it to do battle without blessing.[12]

The beginning of relations between these two synods was a natural fit between two groups which shared much in common.

Walther began corresponding with the leaders of the Norwegian Synod during the latter half of the 1850s. He had met Jacob Aall Ottesen during his visit to Concordia Seminary to find a suitable place for Norwegian students. Ottesen immediately won the affection of Walther. In a letter dated 27 August 1859 Walther encouraged Ottesen to remain in the United States. For Walther the opportunity for service in the new land far outweighed the comfortable lifestyle given up in their native countries.

> Consider what a glorious work is entrusted to us here; here our weak voice is not a voice in the wilderness; here there is no fruitless speculation and theologizing while

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[11] Karen Larsen, Laur. Larsen : Pioneer College President (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1936), 29.

[12] Herman Amberg Preus, Vivacious Daughter: Seven Lectures on the Religious Situation Among Norwegians in America, ed. and trans. Todd W. Nichol (Northfield, MN: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1990), 115.

> everything remains nicely as it was, but here all public speaking becomes action and takes shape and is changed into practice! Unsullied souls will bless us when we are slumbering in the grave if through our faithful warfare we bequeath them the treasure of pure doctrine and of practice based on and in accord with its principles.[13]

Walther closes the letter by referring to himself as "your friend who is unwilling to let go of you." If Walther exercised any influence on the Norwegians at this time it was for encouragement and strength. By this time Walther had been in the United States for almost twenty years, but some of the Norwegian leaders had only been here for five to ten years. Walther probably understood the desire to return to Europe and its familiar environment, but here in the new land were both the opportunities to make a Lutheran Zion and the people who desperately needed pastors.

Carl S. Meyer in his book, Pioneers Find Friends, details the early history of the relationship between the two synods through 1860. He describes the struggles of both synods in a new country where they were no longer state churches. He also discusses the question of how much influence Walther might have had in the early days. One question which arose among some of the Germans was on confessional subscription. Each congregation of the Missouri Synod subscribed to all the symbols contained in the Book of Concord. The Norwegian church had not accepted Luther's Large Catechism, the Smalcald Articles or the Formula of Concord because they had not endured the same doctrinal controversies which had occurred in the German church. Some members of the Missouri Synod wondered if they could be in fellowship with congregations which did not recognize the same symbols. Walther defended the Norwegians and sensed they were moving in the direction of later adopting the Formula of Concord:

> If the Danish-Norwegian Church had wished to introduce this confession, it would have run the risk of evoking the gravest controversies and unrest. This, too, is also the reason why this confession was not accepted officially in that church. It is false and

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[13] C. F. W. Walther, Letters of C. F. W. Walther: A Selection, trans. Carl S. Meyer (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 92.

> erroneous, as one so often reads, that the Norwegian Church is not confessionally constituted as is the German; for, even if the Symbols have not all been accepted officially there, theologians such as Brockmann, Lassenius, et al., prove, nevertheless, that the Book of Concord has always been regarded as the book of Lutheran faith and confession. Besides that, not only are the present faithful Norwegians trying to have the complete Book of Concord accepted, but it is also being translated in Norway into the vernacular itself.[14]

Walther had made subscription to the unaltered Augsburg Confession the basis for discussions in the free conferences. With the Norwegians he recognized that they also subscribed to the Augsburg Confession and looked forward to a day when they would accept the entire Book of Concord and did not give the appearance of pushing the Norwegians towards acceptance. The Norwegian Synod had established itself as a confessional church in 1853 without Walther's aid and wrote in its constitution that the three ecumenical creeds, the Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism were its subscriptional basis.

Meyer concludes his book by determining that the Missouri Synod did not exercise a dominance over the Norwegian Synod from 1847 until 1861. There was an attraction to each other based on a mutual dependence on the confessional fathers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Lutheran confessions and the Bible. These years were formative ones for both synods in which they established themselves as American churches. Having to deal with social and theological issues from an American viewpoint would bring the two synods together and give Walther a leadership role.

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[14]Meyer, 44-5.

III. THE SLAVERY ISSUE

Most of the Norwegian immigrants were against slavery. They shared a love of liberty, a respect for lawful government, and sensitivity to social inequalities. Neither they nor their ancestors had owned slaves for centuries and few of them had ever seen a slave. More than a political issue, though, slavery was also a moral issue. In 1846 the Eielsen Synod had placed a paragraph in its constitution condemning slavery. Within the Norwegian Synod, the laity was against slavery as were some of the clergy. At a pastoral conference, a resolution read: "Although according to the Word of God, it is not in and by itself a sin to keep slaves, nevertheless it is in itself an evil and a punishment from God. We condemn all abuses and sins connected therewith, and furthermore, when official duties require it and Christian love and wisdom demand it, we will work for its abolition."[15]

With the strong relationship between the two synods, it was likely that the Missouri view on slavery would become the view of the Norwegian leaders. The Missouri Synod held that slavery in itself was not sinful and viewed the issue as a question of states' rights. Unlike the Norwegians who were in states in the north, the Missourians were in a state that was debating whether or not to withdraw from the Union. Walther found himself trying to be obedient to two different governments which had conflicting interests. The federal government had its interest in St. Louis with its large arsenal, and there were people in the state government who argued over seccession from the Union. The question

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[15]E. Clifford Nelson, 175.

of states' rights was purely political, but the slavery issue for Walther involved moral questions.

As a theologian Walther looked to Scripture alone for his answer to the slavery issue. Other voices such as the Abolitionists had used Scripture as a basis for their movement but in an improper manner. The 48'ers in St. Louis called for an end to slavery without any Scriptural support. For Walther there was no question that those who said the Bible condemned slavery were reading into it what they wanted to read. If God had wanted to condemn slavery in the Scriptures he would have done so. Walther's acceptance of slavery as an institution did not imply that he accepted its practice in the south. He deplored the treatment of the slaves, and the Gospel was not an excuse for spiritual negligence, the breaking up of families or the other abominations which occurred on plantations. The Gospel compelled owners to treat slaves with respect and dignity as children of God.

In 1863 at the height of the Civil War, Walther wrote in the foreword to the January issue of *Lehre und Wehre*, the theological journal for pastors, on the slavery issue. He described the difference between spiritual freedom and physical freedom and how the latter does not necessarily lead to the former:

> Ruled out is that slaves, according to the judgment of the Holy Spirit, may think thus concerning their believing masters: My master is my brother in Christ, I am therefore equal to him. Therefore he should set me free and I do not have to serve him anymore. According to the judgment of the Holy Spirit, they should rather think thus: My master is my brother in Christ; before Christ I am equal to him. He has no more a higher Father in heaven, no more of a gracious Savior, no more of a Holy Spirit, no fuller forgiveness, no better righteousness of grace, no greater hope than I have. So then I shall not be troubled on account of the lesser equality of the flesh, in which I stand in relation to him in this world, but will serve him all the more, all the more faithfully and lovingly as a dear brother in the faith.[16]

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[16] C. F. W. Walther, "Vorwort," Lehre und Wehre 9 (Jan.-Feb. 1863): 8.

Walther's words clearly do not reflect the general sentiment of the time towards slavery. Christian freedom from the Gospel does not abolish political ordinances but realizes that the authorities that exist have been established by God.

Walther was able to speak clearly to other pastors. Addressing the slavery issue to the laity was more of a challenge. He sensed that many members at his congregation in St. Louis were coming into contact with the views of the abolitionists and the radical groups. In some ways there are parallels between the Norwegian and Missouri Synods. The leaders of the Norwegian Synod gladly listened to Walther but the laity was skeptical. Norwegians as a whole did not like the Germans in the nineteenth century due to the "Schleswig-Holstein question." They were incensed because Germany was in the process of taking the two Elbe duchies, Schleswig and Holstein, away from Denmark. In the 1850s and 1860s there was a series of crises which caused most Norwegians to become anti-German.[17] The Norwegian pastors tried to present the same view to their people but met much resistance. They believed the issue was ultimately a question of the authority of the Bible. The issue might have died out had Norwegian journals not forced the issue by publishing pointed questions and creating suspicions about the leaders and their connections with Missouri. Even well after the end of the Civil War until 1868 there were continuing discussions about the issue.

During the years of the slavery issue Walther's influence on the leaders of the Norwegian Synod increased greatly. Gerhard Belgum in his study on the Norwegian Synod provides a thorough analysis of Walther's growing influence in a manner that is not as critical of Walther as other historians are. The arrangement to educate men at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis was a cause of concern for some who believed that Concordia was a place of pro-slavery sentiment which led to other suspicions of the

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[17]Gerhard L. Belgum, "The Old Norwegian Synod in America 1853 - 1890" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1957), 342.

Germans, but the leaders of the Norwegian Synod placed great faith in Walther. The letters of Walther show his concern for the Norwegians that they make decisions according to a proper understanding of Scripture. Walther told them not to be surprised that people fall away during storms in the church but to remain firm in the Scriptures. He expressed his view that slavery is not in itself sinful but its practice in America was. Belgum notes that "throughout the letter are the ideas and phrases which were the common currency of the Synod's pastors during the entire controversy. There is no doubt at all but that Larsen, Ottesen, Koren, and H. A. Preus received their ammunition throughout the conflict from Walther, both in personal visits and in such correspondence as this."[18]

Ottesen himself realized that there were people who believed that the leaders of the Norwegian Synod were puppets of Walther. He wrote in 1863 that he gave thanks to God for the teachers of the Missouri Synod for helping him to get established in a foreign land; however,

> Neither I nor any of us worship Walther as a god or submit as slaves to his authority. We never mention only the name of Walther or what stand he takes in a matter, . . . but we quote Walther's reasons and proofs from the Word of God, which then, naturally, speak for themselves, and would have the same weight though a child had said something equally good . . . . Because Walther teaches pure doctrine and proves it from Scripture and does not only come with his 'views,' . . . therefore we love him and are glad to receive instruction from him, while we honor and respect his faithfulness and zeal in the service of the truth.[19]

Ottesen had no qualms about using Walther's arguments because they came from Scripture and were not merely his views on a subject. These words show, though, that there was

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[18]Belgum, 364.

[19] S. C. Ylvisaker, "The Missouri Synod and the Norwegians," Ebenezer, ed. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922), 270.

tension in the Norwegian Synod with the leaders appearing to be too closely aligned with the Missouri Synod within only a few years of recognizing fellowship.

IV. THE ELECTION CONTROVERSY

After the Civil War was over, the Norwegian Synod continued to experience problems in its relations with other Norwegians while enjoying increasing friendliness with Germans in the Synodical Conference. The impetus for the formation of the Synodical Conference came from the Eastern District of the Joint Synod of Ohio in 1870. Ohio invited the Missouri, Norwegian, Illinois and Wisconsin Synods to attend a meeting in Chicago, January 11-13, 1871. A second organizational meeting was held with the Minnesota Synod in attendance November 14-16, 1871. The Synodical Conference held its first meeting in July 1872. The constitution affirmed: "The Synodical Conference acknowledges its adherence to the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as God's Word, and to the symbolical books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church constituting the Book of Concord of 1580 as its own." The conference had the objective of "the union of all Lutheran Synods in America in one orthodox American Lutheran Church." Each member's autonomy was maintained, and the conference had only an advisory role to the members.[20]

The Election Controversy placed a terrible strain on the stability of the Synodical Conference. Election is usually associated with John Calvin and Reformed theology. When one thinks of the characteristics of Lutheran doctrine, the ideas of grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone and justification by grace come to mind. Werner Elert describes Lutheran theology as the following:

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[20] E. Clifford Nelson, ed., The Lutherans in North America (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 251.

> . . . in contrast with other types of Protestantism, Lutheranism has always been convinced that the starting point of our theology and its center cannot be that which God has hidden from us, but must be that which He has revealed to us. We stand not for a theology of mystery, but for a theology of revelation. The doctrine of predestination leads us, however, into an unsearchable mystery. We have to acknowledge the mystery and reverence it, but we dare not allow it to cloud the full brightness of God's universal revelation of love.[21]

That there were disagreements among Lutherans in the nineteenth century regarding election which caused much fighting is a sad chapter in the history of American Lutheranism. As with other disagreements, theology was not the only factor involved that led to the tension between the synods.

A good starting point in understanding this controversy would be Walther's view of election. In 1877 Walther presented a paper at the Western District convention on predestination. The theme for this and previous conventions was "the doctrine of the Lutheran Church alone gives all glory to God, an irrefutable proof that its doctrine alone is true." Thesis three stated:

> It [the Evangelical Lutheran Church] teaches that "it is false and wrong when it is taught that not only the mercy of God and most holy merit of Christ, but also in us is a cause of God's election on account of which God has chosen us for eternal life." Be it now: the work of man or his sanctification, man's proper use of the means of grace, man's personal decision, man's longing and prayer, man's nonresistance, or man's faith.[22]

Eventually the Missouri Synod in its convention in 1881 adopted the thirteen theses by Walther which were a summary of his teachings on election and made them the official synodical position. They stated God's desire to save all people, Jesus' death was for all

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[21] Werner Elert, An Outline of Christian Doctrine (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publishing House, 1927), 15.

[22] C. F. W Walther, "21st Western District Convention Altenburg, Mo. Beginning May 25, 1877," Essays for the Church Vol. II 1877-1886 (St. Louis: CPH, 1992), 106.

and that God uses the means of grace to bring all people to repentance and faith. The theses condemned opposite views as being Calvinistic. People are lost through their own fault and not God's will for them to be so. God is moved to choose the elect by His grace and the merits of Christ, and not by anything God foresees in humans. Their certainty lies in the promise of God's grace.[23]

The leadership of the Norwegian Synod agreed with Walther's interpretation of election, yet this agreement created problems for them. The Missouri interpretation of election comes largely from Article XI of the Formula of Concord. The Church of Norway did not formally subscribe to the Formula nor did most of the Norwegian-American synods, including the Norwegian Synod. Norwegians learned their view of election from Erik Pontoppidan's *Explanation* of Luther's Small Catechism. This book was not an official symbol of the Church of Norway, but the clergy and laity faithfully used it. Question 548 stated "What is Election?" "God has appointed all those to eternal life whom He from eternity has foreseen would accept the offered grace, believe in Christ, and remain constant in this faith unto the end." Within the Norwegian Synod two views of election were in vogue. The Missourian way viewed election as unto faith while the old Norwegian view was in view of faith. The difference was another reason for the laity to push for ending relations with the Missouri Synod.[24]

The leadership of the Norwegian Synod through U. V. Koren produced its own statement of beliefs similar to the thirteen theses of Walther. Koren's document was called "*En Redegjorelse*" or "An Accounting." He presented this document at the General Pastoral Conference in Decorah, Iowa, in October 1884. This document consisted of sixty-three theses complete with references to Scripture and the Confessions and served as

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[23] Edward Busch, "The Predestinarian Controversy 100 Years Later," Currents in Theology and Mission 9 (1982): 136.

[24]Nelson and Fevold, 256.

a defense against the false accusations while also presenting all the points in the controversy. The theses were divided into four parts, universal grace, conversion, election, and certainty of salvation. The one section that summarized the entire controversy was the sentence, "We reject the synergistic doctrine that the election in Christ has not taken place in accordance with a free purpose of grace by God, and that 'salvation in a certain sense does not depend on God alone.'"[25] This document does show that the Norwegians were capable of thinking independently of Walther and producing their own materials.

An important element of the distress among the Norwegians was F. A. Schmidt. Friedrich Augustus Schmidt was a German who spoke Norwegian and taught the Norwegian students at Concordia Seminary. In 1876 he became a professor at the new seminary of the Norwegian Synod in Madison, Wisconsin. None of the Norwegians would have believed that they were receiving the man who would become the most controversial character of the Election Controversy. Like Walther he believed his views were protecting genuine Lutheran orthodoxy. Some people question whether Schmidt's dislike of Walther was due to a genuine disagreement over election or the fact that Walther did not choose Schmidt to be his understudy on the faculty of Concordia Seminary. In a letter that Francis Pieper wrote to U. V. Koren in September 1881 he had pity on Schmidt and wrote, "it is quite clear to me from this document that he originally started this quarrel because he was not called to St. Louis. Of course he now believes in his erring conscience which preaches false doctrine. But his erring conscience is the reward of his injustice."[26]

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[25]Aaberg, 34-6.

[26]Belgum, 398.

The Norwegians chose Schmidt to be their delegate at the 1883 Synodical Conference convention. The Missouri delegation had refused to meet with anyone who had labeled them "Calvinistic," which Schmidt had done. Instead of risking more dissension within the synod, the Norwegians decided it would be best for them to leave the Synodical Conference. After a little more than eleven years, the Norwegian and Missouri synods were no longer members of the organization which Walther had hoped would lead to theological agreement and greater cooperation among confessional churches. The two synods though still retained their agreement of fellowship.

During the controversy Schmidt made allegations of false doctrine against Walther. These allegations were primarily against Walther and not many other leaders in the Missouri Synod which meant that few in the Missouri Synod were directly involved. In the Norwegian Synod many pastors were involved. U. V. Koren as the chief theological spokesman for the synod had to deal with Schmidt and all the distress he was causing within the synod. The letters which Walther and Koren exchanged show the support each gave to the other during this difficult time.

Today there are at least seventeen extant letters which Koren wrote to Walther and eighteen which Walther wrote to Koren. One of the early letters of Walther is one from 19 December 1880. This letter is at the beginning of the controversy and Walther defends himself against accusations of Calvinism. He draws his argument from Article II of the Formula of Concord, a symbol which the Norwegian Synod has not declared to have authority; however, as a member of the Synodical Conference, the synod is bound to it. Walther believes that this situation is good for the Norwegians because it shows that they are seriously committed to correct doctrine. The tone of the letter gives the Norwegians encouragement that they are correct in what they are doing.[27]

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[27]Meyer, Pioneers, 94.

The controversy even created some tension between Walther and Koren. In a letter dated 25 April 1882 Walther stated his displeasure that the Norwegians seemed too willing to give in to their opponents for the sake of peace. He suspected that Koren might be weakening his position and wrote, "I cannot understand your admission that the Formula of Concord teaches a general election. Undoubtedly you mean something other than our opponents, who intend it to be an evasion of the idea that election is the cause of our grace and reject everything that pertains to it." Walther had read some of the public writings of other Norwegians and was concerned that Koren not give in as easily as they had.[28]

The year 1884 was the most difficult in the Norwegian Synod with the controversy. The Anti-Missourians realized that they needed to do something since the Missourians held the positions of power in the Synod. Soon many pastors would begin to break away from the synod. The letters which Walther received from Koren describe a situation in which he feels that many of his fellow pastors desire to forsake the truth for the Anti-Missourian viewpoint:

> Here we have [F.A.] Schmidt and [B.J.] Muus and all the Norwegian newspapers against us. Should we be represented as renegades and thereby lose the trust of our faithful remaining congregations, then I really do not know what will happen. Our goal is now the same as before to get through this battle in such a manner that through God's grace we may save as many in our synod as possible for the truth.[29]

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[28]Belgum, 402.

[29]U. V. Koren, Decorah, Iowa, to [C. F. W. Walther, St. Louis, Missouri], LS, 21 April 1884, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis. The original text reads: "Hier haben wir Schmidt u. Muus u. alle norweg. Zeitungen gegen uns. Sollten wir nun auch als Renegaten dargestellt werden und dadurch auch das Vertrauen unserer treu gebliebenen Gemeinden verlieren, dann weiss ich freilich nicht wohin. Unsere Absicht ist es jetzt wie frueher diesen Kampf durchzufuehren aber freilich in der Weise, dass wir durch Gottes Gnade so viel wie moeglich von unserer Synode fuer die Wahrheit erretten koennen."

That Koren looked up to Walther as a leader is evident in his address to him in the beginning of his letters with the phrase, "Hochwuerdiger Herr Doktor, Herzlich geliebter Vater in Christo!" He closed his letters with the phrase, "Ihr dankbarer geringer Schueler."

The letters of Walther often served as a means of giving support to Koren. In a letter dated 26 April 1884 Walther writes:

> Do not worry that we out of judgment want to make even heavier the load which the Lord according to his unfathomable wisdom has laid on you. I have been praying daily for a long time more fervently than before to God for you my comrade in the faith, confession and battle.[30]

Again in August Walther writes:

> Now then, fight onward with patience, come to an understanding but do not make a compromise, otherwise you will lose what you have worked for through heated battle, prayer, groaning and tears. What should I urge you? The God who has been your strength will continue to be such until the last day.[31]

In August 1885 Walther again encourages Koren by reminding him that trials come not to make him falter but to remind him who his strength is, that Christ is the man of God's choosing who fights for him. Koren is not fighting the battle alone for like Luther, he has

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[30]C. F. W. Walther, St. Louis, Missouri to [U.V. Koren, Decorah, Iowa], LS, 26 April 1884, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis. The original text reads, "Haben Sie keine Sorge, dass wir aus Unverstand die Last Ihnen noch schwerer machen werden, die der HErr nach Seinem unerforschlichen Rathe Ihnen auferlegt hat. Ich bete taeglich schon seit langer Zeit bruenstiger, als frueher, fuer Sie zu Gott als meinen theuersten Glaubens, Bekenntniss und Kampfgenossen."

[31]C. F. W. Walther, St. Louis, Missouri to [U.V. Koren, Decorah, Iowa], LS, 10 August 1884, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis. The original text reads: "Wohlan, kaempfen Sie nur fort in aller Geduld u. Lehre; transigieren, pacisciren Sie nur nicht, machen Sie kein definitives Compromiss, sonst wuerden Sie verlieren, was Sie unter heissem Kampf, Gebet, Seufzen u. Thraenen erarbeitet haben. (2. Joh. 8) Doch, was ermahne ich Sie? Der Gott, der bis jetzt Ihre Staerke gewesen ist, wird es auch ferner sein bis zum Tage des Triumphes."

the certainty of the truth of God's Word.[32] These words probably served as encouragement to Koren for many years because he lived twenty-two years longer than Walther who died in 1887.

The Norwegian Synod was a member of the Synodical Conference for eleven years until 1883 but left in an attempt to restore peace among its members who had experienced much pain due to the Election Controversy. There was more distress in the Norwegian Synod than in the Missouri Synod over this issue. Leaders of the synod were forced out of their congregations. H. A. Preus and his son, C. K. Preus served as pastors of the same congregation until Good Friday, 1883, when the congregation deposed them as their pastors for refusing to sign an Anti-Missourian confession of faith. Two years later J. A. Ottesen would experience the same humiliation from his congregations.[33] During this time the Norwegians sensed a stronger desire to keep peace with fellow Norwegians more than to retain good relations with the orthodox of other nationalities. The strong forces of language and nationality held back the Norwegians from unreserved affiliation with the Missouri Synod. From 1876 until 1878 the Synodical Conference discussed the possibility of operating a joint seminary, but the idea failed most likely due to nationality differences and because the Wisconsin Synod reopened its seminary in 1878.[34] Although the Norwegian Synod left the Synodical Conference, it still kept its fellowship ties with the Missouri Synod. The relations between the two synods had been fairly good for over twenty years, but the Election Controversy was a severe strain on the relationship and distinctly altered the future of the fellowship between the two synods.

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[32]Meyer, Pioneers, 98.

[33] Theodore A. Aaberg, A City Set on a Hill (Mankato, MN: Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1968), 32.

[34]Nelson, The Lutheran Church, 183.

Belgum concludes his discussion on Walther as the one man who chiefly exerted the Missouri influence on the Norwegian Synod. He believes that Walther viewed Ottesen and Koren as competent theologians who needed some additional instruction and strengthening. He does not come to a decision whether Walther's influence was a blessing or a curse to the Norwegians, but he realizes that one's "premises, prejudices and conditioned sympathies" will condition his decision. Thus there are others who view the relationship as one of grief and joy as well as one of deep scars and tragic results.[35]

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[35]Belgum, 412.

V. MERGERS AMONG THE NORWEGIANS

After Walther's death in 1887 his influence in the Norwegian Synod continued, but it eventually disappeared. In the thirty years that followed his death the Norwegian Synod had a struggle between Lutheran orthodoxy and Norwegian nationalism. One of the results of the Election Controversy was the formation of the Anti-Missouri Brotherhood. By 1888 the Norwegian Synod had lost one-third of its ministers and congregations, most to the brotherhood. Many of the leaders of this group were located at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. The ideology behind this group comes from religious and social factors. As Norwegians became more American in character they adopted habits of the American religious scene such as the patterns and thought forms of the American democratic faith. In America there was an almost complete repudiation of determinism and anything that denied human freedom. The settlers' experience on the frontier strongly asserted human agency and responsibility.[36] For many Norwegians anything in America that resembled the oppression of the state church in Norway was not welcomed in the new land.

With Schmidt and the Election Controversy came the opportunity for a new alignment among the Norwegians that had been in the works for a long time. The Anti-Missourians represented a new type of churchmanship which was influenced and oriented toward American democratic ideology. This new churchmanship reflected much of the laity's view on human freedom and responsibility. A weakness of this coming alignment

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[36] Leigh D. Jordahl, "F. A. Schmidt, the Election Controversy, and a Problem of Lutheran Orthodoxy on American Soil," Gettsyburg Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin 48 (1968): 24.

was that it did not bring much theological development to the Norwegians but was threatened by theological formlessness and captivity to culture. Norwegian-American Lutheranism was about to become more like American Protestantism and simultaneously promote Norwegian nationalism as ethnicity replaced doctrine for the basis of unity.[37]

In 1890 the formation of the United Norwegian Lutheran Church was the first merger along ethnic lines. Three groups, the Conference for the Norwegian-Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Norwegian Augustana Synod and the Anti-Missourian Brotherhood combined into the largest Norwegian church body of 152,200 baptized and 83,500 confirmed members. The church desired to include all Norwegian Lutherans and was only moderately confessional requiring subscription only to the basic Lutheran symbols of the Augsburg Confession, Luther's Small Catechism and the ecumenical creeds.[38] The Norwegian Synod was no longer the largest synod with its 51,000 confirmed and 94,000 baptized members. Only two issues remained that kept the Norwegians separate. For the Haugeans there was the unresolved issue of lay ministry; for the Norwegians there was the issue of election. The 1890 union increased the desire for complete unity which would cause more strain on the relationship between the Missouri and Norwegian Synods. Throughout these years they still kept their official ties of fellowship.

As the Norwegian Synod entered the twentieth century, more changes were on the horizon. In 1915 Laur. Larsen, a staunch defender of Lutheran Orthodoxy and strong relations with Missouri, died. His death weakened the desire among the synodical leadership to keep its identity with Missouri. The death of U.V. Koren in 1910 had a negative impact on the fellowship between Missouri and the Norwegians. Koren was arguably the strongest defender of Missouri orthodoxy within the Norwegian Synod.

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[37]Jordahl, 29.

[38]Nelson, 340.

Some refer to him as the "Walther of the Norwegians." He viewed the movement among the Norwegians as one of doctrinal indifferentism and unionism. Sensing the confessional theology was disappearing in the synod and that many people held the incorrect opinion on Walther, Koren wrote about the influence of Walther in the Norwegian Synod in 1905:

> Much has been said about the influence which our connection with the Missourians exerted on the Norwegian Synod. It is true, this influence has been of inestimable importance - although not in the way which a great many people who know neither the Missourians nor us imagine. We have not learned anything new from them, that is, any new doctrine or any other doctrine than that which we brought with us from the university in Kristiana (Oslo.)[39]

His opponents had accused him of orthodoxism, but he realized that they had lost regard for true doctrine and misunderstood his zeal for orthodoxy. His reason for orthodoxy was to have a living faith and not merely doctrinal purism. He saw what he believed was the return of pietism where "life" and not "doctrine" was the chief matter in the church; a person's decent life was more important than his beliefs. Faith was reduced to the lowest common denominator. A dangerous teaching going around was "when we do our part, God will also do his" which was a result of church unions built on politics and not unity in the faith.[40]

By the time of Koren's death in 1910 all of the other leaders who helped form the synod had died. J. A. Ottesen had died in 1904 and H. A. Preus had died in 1894. A new generation of leaders in the Norwegian Synod were ready to lead the synod in a new direction. Koren's fear of unity not built on unity in the faith came true two years after his death in February 1912 with the Madison Agreement. The United Church, the Norwegian

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[39] U. V. Koren, "What the Norwegian Synod has Wanted and Still Wants (1890)," Faith of Our Fathers (Mankato, MN: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1953), 99.

[40] E. Clifford Nelson, The Lutheran Church Among the Norwegians Volume II 1890-1959 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960), 130.

Synod and the Hauge Synod had been discussing union, but there were two obstacles. The obstacle for the Norwegian Synod was election, and the obstacle for the Hauge Synod was lay preaching. The theology of election which had been so divisive among the Norwegians was no longer so. The Madison Agreement recognized two views of election and resolved that they were not an obstacle to union:

> Whereas, the deliberations of our new committees have led to a satisfactory agreement concerning the doctrine of election and to an unreserved and unanimous acceptance of that doctrine of election which is set forth in Article XI, Part II of the Formula of Concord and Question 548 in Pontoppidan's Truth unto Godliness . . ., we therefore declare hereby, that the essential agreement concerning these doctrines which has been attained is sufficient for church union.[41]

The *Opgjoer* agreement did not receive universal acceptance among the members of the Norwegian Synod nor among the members of the Synodical Conference to whom this agreement was a compromise and denial of all that the Conference had believed in for many years.

When the Conference met in convention in August 1912 the members called for specific changes to be made in the agreement. Many of the Norwegians took offense at the proposals, for they were viewed as a threat against the proposed unity. The Norwegians remained united and in 1917 formed the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. In 1920 the Conference adopted the following resolution:

> "To our great sorrow we are compelled to state the 'Synod for the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church of America,' by holding fast to the *Opgjoer* and its union with the other two Norwegian synods in 'The Norwegian Lutheran Church of America,' has severed its bond of faith and church-fellowship with the Synodical Conference."[42]

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[41] Richard C. Wolf, Documents of Lutheran Unity in America (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 235.

[42] Ylvisaker, 273-4.

The fellowship which had existed from 1855 had ended. For the Norwegians the goal of unity among them had been reached but at a cost, some would argue, of doctrinal integrity. For Lutheran orthodoxy there was still a small remnant who had not approved of the new church and formed their own church, the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church. Only within this remnant would there be any future recognition of what Walther had done for the Norwegians. Earlier in 1903 a member of the Norwegian Synod wrote:

> But this is certain, that Dr. Walther, by his thoroughly Christian character, by his great humility, by his personality patterned after the image of Christ, by his rich and productive mind, by his intimate acquaintance with the works of Luther, by his clearness and firmness in confession, by his thoroughly Christian and truly churchly and Lutheran viewpoint, has, both in and through his excellent writings and in and through his many faithful disciples, planted a seed among us Norwegian Lutherans which to this day has borne blessed fruit for the knowledge of the truth, God's revealed truth, for its propagation, its preservation, and establishment in the present generation, and will bear blessed fruit in future generations. His memory will live and shine on the firmament of the Church of God with a luster probably still more glorious in future days, and he will remain a teacher for all time to come.[43]

These words are true for the small remnant, but the majority of Norwegians who went into the new church quickly forgot Walther. He was not a lasting influence for those Norwegians nor was confessional Lutheranism.

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[43] Ibid., 272.

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VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to discover what Walther's influence on the Norwegian Synod was and how some people have critiqued that influence. As one might expect, those who are in favor of the Missouri Synod speak favorably of Walther's influence while those who are not in favor of the Missouri Synod look down on Walther's influence. At the beginning of the relationship between the two synods Walther did not have a strong influence. He did not tell the Norwegians how to organize their synod nor did he exert any pressure on them to subscribe to the complete Book of Concord.

Walther's influence grew as the Norwegian leadership had to deal with different problems such as slavery and election. Certainly the Norwegians had received a good education in Christiana and were knowledgeable about the issues with which they had to contend. One problem for them, though, was their isolation in the new land. It was difficult to turn to the faculty back in Christiana for help. The Lutherans on the East Coast, they realized, had lost much of their Lutheran identity and theology. They distanced themselves from the Eielsen Synod and other Norwegians due to theological differences. The Missourians were a natural friend to turn to because of their similar theology. They quickly realized that Walther had much to offer them with his intelligence and sound understanding of Scripture and the Confessions.

What worked against the clergy was the laity. Much of the laity was suspicious of this relationship with the Germans. There was bitterness over the current events in Europe with Germany taking land away from Denmark. The difference in languages did not help either since it resulted in neither group being able to communicate well with the other. The difference in language has to be combined with the fact that few of the

Norwegians and the Germans came into contact with each other. Living in separate town or farming communities resulted in there being little contact between the two groups, which resulted in ignorance in understanding each other.

The greatest obstacle to accepting Missouri confessionalism was Norwegian nationalism. The Norwegians were culturally quite different than the Germans in the Missouri Synod. They had left Europe for different reasons. Some of the Germans wanted primarily religious freedom. Most of the Norwegians had left a society that offered little hope for the future except for a life of poverty and few opportunities. America was the land of new opportunities, and the Norwegians wanted to take advantage of everything they could. Slowly they began to adapt their church to what they saw in America and created a church that was democratic in structure and slowly became like other American Protestant churches. There was no question that they wanted to remain Lutheran, but to remain confessional Lutherans was not a priority.

Walther's influence on the Norwegians disappeared after his death because his influence was primarily on the clergy and not on the laity. As the clergy whom he had influenced passed on, his influence decreased. Had Walther been more influential on the laity, perhaps there might have been more Norwegians in 1917 that would not have joined the new church, but the factor of nationalism was something he had no control over.

This setting with its confessional clergy and laity with a lax confessionalism somewhat resembles the situation of the Missouri Synod today. There are many pastors who are solidly confessional in their beliefs and practice. Some of them find themselves in situations which test their ability to maintain their confessional identity. The history of the Norwegian Synod shows that as people move away from confessional Lutheranism it becomes increasingly difficult for the clergy alone to keep the church body confessional unless a good portion of the laity are confessional as well. It is hoped that Walther's influence will remain in the Missouri Synod for many years to come.

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