

An Open Letter to the Protest Committee, Wisconsin Synod

by Edmund C. Reim

[The letter which follows is chiefly concerned with the reply which I owe to the Protest Committee. In giving it Synod-wide distribution, I am moved only in part by the fact that by resolution of the General Synodical Committee the "Report to the Protest Committee" supplied by Prof. Lawrenz is to be distributed to all pastors and male teachers of the Synod. I am also moved by sincere concern for those who were once my brethren.

I know that this will by some be construed as agitation and interference. This reproach I am willing to bear. To those, however, who are ready to consider the matter, I offer the assurance that what I have written has been said with the sincere intention of aiding the reader to arrive at the truth by studying this presentation of the "other side" of the case.

- E. R.]

Rhineland, Wis.
October 29, 1958

To the Members of the Protest Committee
Pastor Leonard H. Koeninger, Chairman
1101 So. Eighth St.
Manitowoc, Wisconsin

Dear Len,

First of all let me acknowledge receipt of the letter which you and your committee have sent to all protesting members and ex-members of the Wisconsin Synod. I note the obvious sincerity of your closing paragraph in which you plead with those of us who have severed our relations with the Synod to reconsider the step which we felt bound to take. Nor am I insensible to the warmth of those paragraphs of Lawrenz's letter which you quote in this connection. Nothing would please me more than such a solution – if it could be done without violating the very conscience and the very principles for the sake of which I have chosen the lonely way of separation from a Synod which for so many years I have tried faithfully to serve. You must surely realize, however, that this is not possible on the basis which you and your committee outline.

As you state the case, it is we who have separated or who are protesting the course of Synod who are guilty of weakening Wisconsin's testimony in the eyes of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod by the appearance that there is no longer harmony and unity in the stand over against Missouri. That Wisconsin's stand has been weakened, I will grant indeed! I neither will nor can grant, however, that this has been done by our recent action and protest. Has it been forgotten how President Brenner's letter to the 1953 (Houston) convention of the Missouri Synod (sent with the full approval of the Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union, and with the unqualified endorsement of the General Synodical Committee) was virtually disavowed by the adoption of the first of these sorry resolutions of postponement and procrastination (Watertown-Bethesda, 1953) which have progressively weakened what had once been spoken of with some respect as "the Wisconsin Position"? Has it been forgotten how Saginaw spoke boldly

in its Preamble, and then shrank back from decisive action in regard to its Resolution? And how New Ulm capped the climax by rejecting in its entirety the recommendation of the Floor Committee (which felt conscience-bound to call for suspension of church fellowship with Missouri “lest our own Wisconsin Synod be affected by the same unionistic spirit which finally weakens and destroys all true doctrine and leads to indifference and liberalism concerning Scriptural truth.”)! Can subsequent protests and even withdrawals “weaken” a testimony, the effectiveness of which has already been destroyed by these official Synodical actions?

Since your report, however, places the burden of responsibility on those of us who have protested these actions, it practically compels a reply. Therefore, even though such a course is utterly distasteful to me, I find myself constrained to answer publicly both your report and the letter of Prof. Lawrenz which it quotes so liberally. And since your report is receiving wide circulation, and Prof. Lawrenz’s letter even wider, I see no other way of meeting the situation which has thus been created than to make this, my reply, an Open Letter – reserving to myself the decision as to how widely it shall be circulated. In doing so, I shall for convenience follow the outline of the Lawrenz letter.

I.

“What was the import of our Saginaw Resolution?”

Under this heading we are asked “to face the question anew: Did our Synod at Saginaw *conclusively* (original emphasis) put the Missouri Synod under the judgement of Rom. 16:17f.?” We are told (page 2) that not merely the judgement expressed in the resolution and the action recommended by it, but also the judgement expressed in the preamble was held in abeyance, pending the examination of added evidence desired. This thought is repeated on page 5:

“At Saginaw our Synod stated in its preamble that all the evidence before us at that time . . . *would* necessitate our placing the Missouri Synod under the judgement of Rom. 16:17f.” (Here as well as in most other cases the emphasis is mine. After this I shall restrict myself to indicating *original* emphasis when it occurs in direct quotations. E.R.)

I hold that this is beside the point. Surely the real issue is not whether Synod has been consistent in its course, or whether the interpretation that is offered “makes sense”, but rather whether the course that has been followed is *right*, whether it is true to Scripture. I could, therefore, go on to the next point, which raises the real question, were it not that this argument has apparently made such a profound impression on your committee, and is cutting such a wide swath in the Synod. I will grant that this is now becoming “the official interpretation,” and must be accepted *as such*. It is now the only basis on which one can deal with Synod. But does that make it *right*? Isn’t there a difference between objective fact and subjective interpretation – which is so often governed by wishful thinking?

Let me state clearly that I do not imply that Prof. Lawrenz has reached his conclusions in this manner. I distinctly recall an occasion (in May of 1957, as our Standing Committee was preparing its report for New Ulm) when I said to him that now it becomes clear to me that we had been operating with two different interpretations of the Saginaw resolution. He agreed. (I am also reminded of something that I had long forgotten, an incident at the Watertown convention of 1956, where I had stated that in order to be consistent and to clear the record Synod ought to repeal its Saginaw resolution because of the judgement expressed – to which Prof. Lawrenz

replied that this would not be necessary since that judgement was not a conclusive one. The full significance of these remarks must have escaped me at the time.)

I fully believe, therefore, that what the Professor is offering now is what has been in his mind since Saginaw. But I also believe that my failure to note this sooner was not due solely to obtuseness on my part. Your committee admits that it, as well as many others, “did not understand it that way at the time” (page 3). That your earlier views were perhaps closer to the real situation than your present thinking will, I believe, become clear as one reviews certain facts as they stand in the record. They leave little room for the idea that the Saginaw Preamble dealt with a situation where the evidence was still incomplete, and a conclusive verdict could therefore not yet be rendered. I ask you to consider:

A. The *immediate context* of the Floor Committee’s report.

The Floor Committee had before it the report of the Standing Committee which, after mentioning a few considerations that might seem to counsel further delay, stated:

“F. We have, however, arrived at the firm conviction that, because of the divisions and offenses that have been caused, and which have until now not been removed, *further postponement of a decision would be a violation* of the apostolic injunction of *Romans 16:17* (I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them). (proceedings, 1955, p. 79)

The Floor Committee also heard the President Naumann’s Opening Address:

“The charges which we brought in an effort to do our brotherly duty before God, have been definitely denied. We have reached the conviction that though these differences divisions and offenses have been caused contrary to the doctrine which we have learned. *And when that is the case*, the Lord our God has a definite command for us: ‘Avoid them.’

"For those of us who have been closest to these problems, it appears quite definite that we must now obey the Lord's Words in Romans 16:17." (Proceedings 1955, p. 13)

B. The text of the Floor Committee's Report

Three sentences out of the Preamble have been quoted many times. Permit me to repeat them, but also to add a fourth which follows a few lines farther down, and which I shall set off by renewing the quotations marks.

"A church body which creates divisions and offenses by its official resolutions, policies and practices not in accord with Scripture also become subject to the indictment of Romans 16:17-18. The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has by its official resolutions, policies, and practices created divisions and offenses both in her own body and in the entire Synodical Conference. Such divisions and offenses are of long standing." (Proceedings, 1955, p. 85)

"In view of these facts your Floor Committee, together with the Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union, affirms our position that the Missouri Synod . . . has brought about a break in relations, and that our Synod, bound by the Word of God, should now declare itself on the matter." (Proceedings, 1955, p. 86)

C. The text of the resolution

Leaving aside for the moment the committee's suggestion to postpone a vote until a later day let me ask you to consider the simple text of the proposed resolution.

"RESOLVED, that whereas The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has created divisions and offenses by its official resolutions, policies, and practices not in accord with Scripture, we, in obedience to the command of our Lord in Romans 16¹⁷⁻¹⁸ terminate our fellowship with The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod." (Proceedings, 1955, p. 86)

D. The reasons given for the postponement

It is true indeed that the committee report calls for a postponement of the vote on the proposed resolution. But was it because the evidence was not yet complete? Concerning this deferment of action the committee itself says:

"We recommend this course of action for the following reasons:

1. This resolution has far reaching consequences.
2. This continues to heed the Scriptural exhortations to patience and forbearance in love by giving The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod opportunity to express itself in its 1956 convention." (Proceedings, 1955, p. 86)

Surely if need for further evidence was one of the reasons for postponement, that would have *had to be said* at this point, particularly after the strong judgements of the Standing Committee and the President's Reports, and in view of the stern judgement of the resolution. Nor should the dissent of a substantial minority of the committee be overlooked.

"We, the undersigned members of the Floor Committee, although we are in full agreement with the Preamble and the resolution to terminate fellowship, *are of the conviction that the reasons stated for delay do not warrant postponement of action upon the resolution.*" (Proceedings, 1955, p. 86f.)

If the point at issue in this difference within the committee itself was that there still was need for further evidence, how could this have escaped mention in the foregoing quotations? If after the Standing Committee's pointed words (that *further postponement* would be a *violation of Romans 16*), and after the emphatic "now" of President Naumann (we must *now* obey the Lord's Word) the Floor Committee mean to plead insufficient evidence as the cause for the delay, would they not have said so in plain words? Yes, if the evidence was not yet all in, how could they formulate a verdict so stern as that of the Preamble – to say nothing of reporting it publicly? How could they even *arrive* at a verdict?

May I venture to suggest that you Protest Committee was a bit hasty in adopting Prof. Lawrenz's interpretation? It is after all an interpretation which is not borne out by a careful examination of the record.

Bear with me if in this connection I introduce one more point, one that I mention reluctantly because it involves me personally, but one that is nevertheless a part of the public record. I refer to my protest offered after the adoption of the Saginaw resolution, of which I need quote only the first part.

"The decision of the Synod to continue its fellowship with The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod pending a vote to follow the convention of that body in 1956 (even while recognizing that there is full reason for a separation now) compels me to declare that I can continue fellowship with my Synod only under clear and public protest."
(Proceedings, 1955, p. 87)

For our present discussion let me emphasize the parenthetical remark, "(even while *recognizing that there is full reason for a separation now*)."
If further evidence was needed before Synod could speak conclusively, would that not have been the obvious answer to my protest? If Synod was *not* recognizing that there was full reason for a separation at that time, would that not have been the conclusive reply?

I am ready to make full allowance for the fact that all this came up during the closing hours of the convention, and that this answer might not immediately have occurred to those who had advocated passage of the resolution. It was a trying situation for them also. But if my protest was based upon a misunderstanding on my part of the true meaning of the Saginaw resolution, how is it that a few weeks later, when there had been time for ample reflection, the entire Standing Committee, with the addition of the chairman of the Floor Committee of Saginaw, spent the better part of an afternoon session in trying to persuade me to reconsider my protest, without once pointing out this oversight on my part – if an oversight it was? How explain the fact that for another two years our entire Seminary faculty lived and worked with me without at least trying to open my eyes to this simple solution?

I have gone at some length into these points which I believe you Protest Committee has overlooked in arriving at its present position, and am convinced that your conclusions therefore are premature. Even as you ask me to reconsider my action, so let me ask you to go into this entire matter once more. I still believe that, on the basis of the record, you will find that the thesis of Prof. Lawrenz, which was certainly latent in his mind ever since the events of Saginaw, matured quite gradually (as such things do), and began to emerge into public view only as we were approaching the crisis of 1957. Since both the final development by its author and its eager acceptance by so many others fall into the period when it became imperative to find what is called "an interpretation that makes sense," is it not possible that the natural human desire to "rationalize" a bad situation has played a part in all this? Isn't the real question before you not whether the interpretation, but whether the original *action* of Saginaw made sense? My contention, and I think that of most protestors, is that it did not.

II.

"Is the application of Rom. 16:17f. to the Missouri Synod simply a matter of obedience to the Word of God?" (Lawrenz letter, p. 3)

Frankly, I wince at the formulation of the question. Are we beginning to operate with the idea of a qualified obedience? I shall come back to this later.

But in the meantime let me ask whether your Protest Committee sustains the way in which Prof. Lawrenz describes the thinking of those of us who would answer his above question in the affirmative? Do we "question whether the matter of applying Rom. 16;17f. to Missouri leaves room *at all* for *any* human judgement?" Is the record of the many years of patient dealing with Missouri to be so lightly set aside? Surely, the very duration of these dealings shows that we knew "of no simple mechanical formula" which we might apply, but were trying to see the problem in its full scope and with all its implications, in the meantime exercising the best judgement of which we were capable (or, to quote your adviser, (page 4) coming to such conviction "only by earnest and prayerful use of our Christian judgement in evaluating all the details and factors of the case."). Nor was there any lack during all this time of "efforts to overcome the error and its defense." They were made in committee, in local conferences, in the form of direct communications to the Praesidium and the conventions of the sister synod, as well as in the forum of the Synodical Conference which, among other things, had been created for that very purpose. And when after all these efforts the Standing Committee finally presented its findings to the Saginaw convention, and when President Naumann formulated his Opening Address – surely, this was all done only after the most careful thought and judgement, even as this must be assumed also for the procedure of the Floor Committee and the convention itself with regard to the Preamble. The protests that followed the action of postponement were not against the judgment *in its proper place*, but against making the plea for an area of judgement to become the basis for further (and sometimes almost interminable) postponement of decision and action.

Judgement indeed, but judgement of the most patient and careful kind, as long as we are studying the question of *whether* Romans 16:17 applies to a given case. But when that has been determined, when a Synod speaks as ours did at Saginaw (quoted in the foregoing section), when official word is sent out "*that this passage does apply to the Missouri Synod because of its persistent adherence to its unionistic practices*" (post-convention News Bulletin, submitted to and approved by President Naumann before release by the Board for Information and Stewardship), when the Northwestern Lutheran in its post-convention number reports the unanimous adoption of "the Preamble, which reiterated the 1953 charges of our Synod *and applied Romans 16:17-18,*" – when the situation becomes so clear, then surely the Synod has *by its own words and actions* recognized that it has passed out of the area of judgement into that of action, and that now simple obedience is indeed the only Scriptural course that is left, since it has been compelled to conclude that it has been dealing with "causers" of divisions and offenses. Does that leave *any* alternative but to "avoid"? Is it not an injection of a foreign, man-made thought into the simple sense of Romans 16:17-18 to say that "termination of church fellowship is called for when you have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail and that the erring brother or church body demands recognition for their error."? (Lawrenz letter, foot of p. 4) After all, the passage in question states that this is to be done when one has "marked" (noted, identified, recognized) them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine that we have learned.

It is also argued that the judgement of the Preamble could not have been conclusive because further evidence was desired. In this connection let me ask only whether it is a question of what we "desire," when the evidence *was* already conclusive – and was officially recognized

as such? Can we improve upon the method of the Lord? Saul tried that, I Samuel 15, - and was rejected.

III.

"Was there any warrant for holding the judgement of the Saginaw resolution in abeyance after the St. Paul convention?" (Lawrenz letter, p. 4)

At this point most of the signers of the protests that are before you will probably disagree with me when I say that there *was* such warrant. But when I say that, I do not place these three resolutions (Saginaw, Watertown, New Ulm) on a par with each other, as the Lawrenz letter does. Nor can I let the statement stand that our Union Committee in its St. Paul report operated with what is now offered as the official interpretation of the Saginaw resolution (Lawrenz letter, p. 8) Let me explain.

In 1956 our Synod faced an anomalous situation, finding itself in a sort of no-man's lands of its own creation, caught by the consequences of the failure at Saginaw to match its words with action. Now came Missouri's St. Paul convention with its resolutions, *some of which might mean* what we were hoping for, *some* of which sounded a note of humility and regret that might *possibly* be an expression of genuine repentance. Faint though these possibilities were, they made it impossible to advocate a break without leaving a nagging doubt as to whether a genuine offer had not perhaps been rejected, whether a smoking flax had not perhaps been quenched. Not until the meaning of those doubtful resolutions had been further explored could Synod act with certainty. Hence the recommendation of the Standing Committee, which is also incorporated in the Watertown resolution, "to hold in abeyance." That this is not simply continuance of the policy of Saginaw should be clear, There is was a matter of postponing a decision "because further evidence was desired," where the sufficiency of the evidence had already been acknowledged by the acceptance of the Preamble without a dissenting vote. At Watertown, however, the Synod was confronted with a new situation. That is why the resolution does not read, "that we *continue* to hold in abeyance," but simply, "that we hold in abeyance." This is why, without seeking to attribute my view to any of my fellow protestors, I do believe that there was warrant for the Watertown resolution (which did not, however, envision the prolonged postponement which is now in effect).

That this does not hold good for the New Ulm postponement is demonstrated by the replies received from the Missouri Praesidium to our inquiries concerning the meaning of certain of the St. Paul resolutions, particularly those concerning the Common Confession. It should not be forgotten that the Watertown resolution, "to hold in abeyance," was based on certain premises which were spoken of as the irreducible minimum of which we must be assured in answer to our inquiries. They follow:

"WHEREAS, The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod resolved that 'hereafter the Common Confession (Parts I and II) be not regarded or employed as a functioning basic document toward the establishment of altar and pulpit fellowship with other church bodies'; and

"WHEREAS, we understand this to mean that thereby The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod's 1950 resolutions concerning the Common Confession have been set aside

(Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1951, page 117, Resolution No. 14, the first and third Resolved)."

(Proceedings, 1956, p. 60 – quoted from N-Wis. District Supplement)

Twice during the time between the 1956 and 1957 conventions the Missouri Praesidium was asked whether we may assume the above to have been the meaning of the Missouri resolution. It was indeed a serious breach in the ranks of the Standing Committee when the majority held "that the expressed attitude of the representatives of the Missouri Synod 'still gives us some reason to hope for the eventual settlement of the differences'," while a minority (including both Prof. Lawrenz and myself) felt constrained to state "that the major basis upon which we resolved to enter into further discussion with the Missouri Synod *has been removed.*" (as quoted by the chairman of the Floor Committee in his "Introductory Remarks" – Proceedings, 1957, p. 141f) Recognizing this situation as well as other points mentioned in the report of the Standing Committee, the Floor Committee spoke of itself as "*conscience bound* to declare publicly, that these principles, policies, and practices create a division between our Synods which The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod alone can remove," and followed this with its resolution to suspend church fellowship with The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. (Proceedings, 1957, p. 143)

I submit that in spite of the common denominator of postponement, there is no warrant for placing these three resolutions on a par with each other, or to argue for any recognizable measure of consistency in their respective implications.

IV.

***What justification is there for continuing our discussions with Missouri now?
(Lawrenz letter, p. 6)***

It is at this point that Prof. Lawrenz makes his strongest appeal, introducing a record of achievement, pointing to marks of progress, raising the guarded hope of better things to come for those who have been troubled about the events of the last few years. Above all, he offers the comforting assurance that nothing less than full agreement will satisfy, by quoting the expressed determination of the Committee "to come to grips with the issues without evasion or equivocation." – But what about the record? As I read it, the foundation for all this guarded optimism is the success that is claimed for the Committee's efforts to dispose of the inadequacy of the Common Confession as a controversial issue. But has the Committee actually achieved such signal success? Let me point to two simple facts.

A. The Committee has substantially scaled down the stipulation of the Watertown convention (with its *irreducible minimum*).

The premise upon which the Watertown resolution was based has been quoted above, in Part III. For the tracing of the subsequent developments let me set excerpts from the Committee's successive questions and the corresponding answers of the Missouri Praesidium into parallel columns.

Question	Answer
<p>1. Does the first "Resolved" . . . set aside and replace Resolution 14 . . . of 1950? (Proceedings, 1957, p. 132)</p>	<p>1. The 1950 resolutions remain true in the 1950 setting of negotiations and are therefore upheld in this setting. 1. The 1950 resolutions remain true in the 1950 setting of negotiations and are therefore upheld in this setting. <i>Synod has not set them aside or replaced them.</i> The "recent historical developments," however, have induced Synod to set aside the Common Confession . . . as a functioning basic document toward the establishment of altar and pulpit fellowship with other church bodies. (Proceedings, 1957, p. 132)</p>
<p>2. Does the action of the 1956 convention mean that henceforth the Common Confession is not to be regarded or employed as the settlement of <i>past</i> doctrinal differences between the American Lutheran Church and the Missouri Synod? (Proceedings, 1957, p. 132)</p>	<p>2. . . . the Common Confession will <i>henceforth</i> not be regarded or employed as a functioning basic document toward the establishment of . . . fellowship with other church bodies, which . . . includes the settling of doctrinal differences, which is basic for such fellowship. (Proceedings, 1957, p. 132)</p>
<p>3. Do you <i>now</i> have a document of which it is claimed that it is a settlement of the differences with the American Lutheran Church? (Progress Report, Northwestern Lutheran, June 22, 1958, p. 204)</p>	<p>3. In view of the recent historical developments . . . and in view of our Synod's resolutions at St. Paul . . . it follows that the Common Confession can not <i>now</i> (original emphasis) be employed as a "de facto" (i. e. actually functioning) settlement of doctrine between The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church. The Common Confession is not an "actually functioning" document. (Report to the Nine Districts, 1958, p. 41)</p>

As one goes down the line of the questions it becomes clear that Wisconsin began with a demand that looked back to 1950, but ended with one that contents itself with a "Do you *now* have." Missouri, on the other hand, has consistently defended its 1950 resolution, granting only that "recent historical developments" had changed the picture. Wisconsin seems to have gained a point by exacting the use of the word "settlement" from Missouri. But Missouri promptly protected this salient by its emphasis on the "now" ("can not *now* be employed" etc.) This conviction grows as one observes that all this is merely an expansion of Pastor Nickel's earlier statement, "that the Common Confession *ceases to be a de facto settlement* of doctrinal differences." So there was a time when it was an "actually functioning" document! Can it be said more plainly that Missouri has not receded by an iota from its 1950 position? – The Watertown convention did not ask for much in its stipulation on this subject. The Committee has, however, settled for less – far less!

B. The Union Committee bases its reassurance on future, still unfulfilled performance.

It is granted (foot of page 6) "that the status of the Common Confession in the past, with its inadequate statements, *could have weakened and undermined* the Scriptural understanding of the doctrines involved in our own circles and also made in unclear to those outside of our Synodical Conference circles whether this body as a whole still holds to the full Scriptural position on these doctrines as this was true in the past." This certainly is quite a grave matter. And yet, instead of holding its announcements which actually concede the issue of the Common Confession in abeyance until this was settled beyond possibility of doubt, these remaining spiritual matters are left for future settlement, in the new (and still problematical) Joint Statement of Doctrine. And this includes the doctrines of justification, conversion, and election – the very ones in which we found the SOLA GRATIA impaired when we reviewed the Common Confession in 1950!

If these things are true – and I think that the record bears it out – then the question at the head of this section ("what justification is there for continuing our discussions with Missouri now?") must be answered in the negative. For if the foundation is so dangerously weak, then continued building on this foundation is presumptuous, and invites the disaster of Mt. 7:27 – the house built on sand.

That God in His infinite mercy may avert such a tragedy – this is the sincere and fervent prayer of a one-time brother.

(Signed) E. Reim
P.O. Box 701
Rhineland, Wis.