

CELEBRATING THE 175TH ANNIVERSARY OF WELS



"Prize the brotherhood; prize the brotherhood."

—Prof. J. P. Meyer, who served at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary for 44 years, about the Protes'tant Controversy.

THE PROTES'TANT CONTROVERSY

Because the church is made up of sinners living in a sinful world, controversies and conflicts infect the church. Such was the case with what has come to be known as the Protes'tant Controversy that broke out in the Wisconsin Synod in the mid-1920s.

The Roaring Twenties were a tumultuous time in the nation. Immorality was flaunted. Many people had a disdain for authority. New technologies like the telephone, radio, movies, automobiles, and airplanes were causing rapid changes in society.

The Wisconsin Synod was also rocked by changes. In 1917, the Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan Synods had formally merged, and the former independent synods became districts, with Wisconsin divided into three districts. The synod was still trying to figure out procedures and policies. Meanwhile, the transition from German to English was unsettling to many.



The seminary faculty in 1928:
(left to right) J. P. Meyer, August Pieper, William Henkel, J. P. Koehler. A rift occurred in the faculty during the Protes'tant Controversy, leading to the termination of Koehler's call.

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The controversy began with a disputed discipline case involving over two dozen students at Northwestern College in the spring of 1924. Two professors resigned in protest. Then two female teachers at St. Paul's in Fort Atkinson, Wis., accused their pastor of being a false prophet because they felt he wasn't dealing strongly enough with the ills of society. Eventually, district officials suspended the teachers. Several pastors protested. Finally, a polarizing essay delivered by Pastor William Beitz made sweeping judgments that condemned preaching, catechism instruction, and seminary training in the synod. District officials asked the seminary faculty for a *Gutachten* or "expert opinion." This led to a rift in the faculty, especially between the renowned theologians August Pieper and J. P. Koehler.

By the end of the decade, more than 20 pastors had been suspended from the synod because they protested the actions of synod leaders (thus the name Protes'tants). In 1928, these Protes'tants began publishing the journal *Faith-Life*, in which they continued to criticize the synod. Regular publication continued until 2019. In 1930, the synod terminated Koehler's call as seminary president and professor for his support of the Protes'tants.



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