

The Norwegian Merger And The ELS

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Depending on our ages and geographic backgrounds, there are some of us who will recall hearing our parents mention something about the "little" Norwegian Synod. It may have been some years before we realized that the official name of this group is the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, a name adopted as recently as 1958. Nevertheless, two distinct impressions were made concerning these Lutherans. One was that they are our friends and hold the same beliefs as we who are in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The other is that there must at some time, even if it is no longer the case, have been a "large" Norwegian Synod. For some reason or another the Norwegian Lutherans of the ELS must have felt that they could not in good conscience worship with those members as true and full brothers in the faith. This paper in no way makes a claim to be some sort of comprehensive treatment of the history behind these facts and impressions. What is hoped is that in some small way this writing will bring into a little better focus the relationship between the merger of many Norwegian Lutherans in our nation in 1917 and the establishment of the ELS in 1918. When the cards are laid out on the table, one should be able to see that the founders of the ELS did not follow the easy way, but they did follow the Scriptural way.

At the turn of the twentieth century in the United States, a number of synods were in existence which were comprised mainly of Norwegian Lutherans. The two largest of these groups were the United Norwegian Lutheran Church and the Norwegian Synod. Of these two, the Norwegian Synod held to a stronger confessional position. In fact, it had been a part of the Synodical Conference for a while. It withdrew in the 1880's during the election controversy. This action was taken, not because the Norwegian Synod had a wrong view on election, but so that it might more easily take care of its internal affairs. After all, the chief instigator of this controversy, Professor F.A. Schmidt, had been serving in the Norwegian Synod. He and some followers left the Norwegian Synod at this time. It is this synod in which the ELS has its roots.

Early efforts were made to restore unity among Norwegian Lutherans not long after the split of the 1880's. The Norwegian Synod participated in these discussions. That there was a strong and widespread hope for a general unification of Norwegian Lutherans should come as no surprise. As one source has put it:

Part of the reason, as most historians of Norwegian Lutheranism have pointed out, was the common cultural heritage which they shared. Not only did they speak the same language and live in the same general region (the Upper Midwest), but Norwegians belonging to different synods had occasion for friendly contact with each other in the prevalent Norwegian musical, literary, historical, reform, athletics, or welfare societies. Especially important were the Norwegian Society of America, for the preservation of Norwegian culture, and the *bygdelag* groups which brought together immigrants from the same "*bygd*" or section of Norway. Although nonreligious, these cultural associations fostered a general sense of Norwegian solidarity, provided a setting for friendly contact between officials, pastors, and members of the various synods, and occasionally even exerted pressure for Norwegian church union.¹

These people also had the common heritage of hymnody, religious education using Pontoppidan's explanation of Luther's Small Catechism, and a state church situation in Norway which allowed for various group emphases within the Lutheran church structure. With such a combination of religious and cultural bonds the Norwegian Lutherans did not forget their kinship with one another.

In 1905 the third major group of Norwegian Lutherans, the Hauge Synod, revived the unity discussions which had stalled on the question of election in the late nineties. In 1906 representatives of the three major synods came to an agreement on absolution and the proper role of laymen in the work and worship of the

¹ E. Clifford Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 371.

church. Substantial progress toward agreement was also made on the doctrines of the call and conversion. Pastor Aaberg's evaluation of these moves toward agreement reads as follows:

The theses adopted were acceptable in general, but lacked antitheses, and so offered no real assurance that the false positions which had caused the original controversies had been repudiated. This was especially true in regard to the document on conversion. Thesis eleven stated: "When a person is converted, the glory belongs to God alone, because it is he who throughout, from beginning to end, without any co-operation on the part of man, works conversion in the person who becomes converted; that is, acknowledges his sin and believes in Christ" "This thesis would do very well under ordinary circumstances, but considering the past controversy, an antithesis rejecting the error espoused by the "Anti-Missourians" (that since natural man has power to choose to reject Christ he therefore also has power to choose to accept Him), should have been included to ensure agreement.²

If the agreement really was present on this thesis regarding conversion it should not have been very difficult to also reach agreement about election, especially since the Norwegian Synod had made it clear in 1884 that it would look charitably on the use of the Second Form of the doctrine of election. In its document entitled "An Accounting," the synod did not acknowledge "election in view of faith" as the presentation of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, but it did acknowledge it in a limited way and stated that it did not regard anyone who used the phrase as a false teacher so long as he kept the doctrines of sin and grace pure.³ Despite this, the committees from the three church bodies labored from 1908 to 1910 without agreeing on the doctrine of election. Because of this impasse, the Norwegian Synod's committee felt constrained to leave the joint meetings in 1910.

Since an impasse had been reached between the two church bodies after years of discussion, the Norwegian Synod should have heeded the warnings and instructions of Scripture regarding false prophets and false doctrine. In addition, President T. H. Dahl of the United Church, supported by the body's committee, charged in 1910 that the Norwegian Synod's theses on election were un-biblical and un-Lutheran. Yet what did the Norwegian Synod do? It decided not only to continue the unification meetings, but to elect a new committee as well.⁴ One possible reason behind this action was that the three conferring bodies were cooperating to produce a hymnbook. Another factor was Professor H. G. Stub. He had been elected Vice-President of the Norwegian Synod in 1905 and was more liberal than President Koren. When President Koren died in December of 1910 Professor Stub took his place. And, as is often the case in such unionizing, there was the matter of "good sportsmanship."⁵ The 1910 district conventions of the Norwegian Synod stated that the two forms of election should not be church-divisive. A number of prominent United Church pastors in Wisconsin agreed. Both church bodies then elected a new union committee.

These two committees made short work of their assignment. The agreement that couldn't be reached for years was arrived at by the new committees in three months. They met November 21-24, 1911, and gave a subcommittee the job of working on the problem, The Joint Committee then met again February 14-22, 1912, in Madison, At this meeting they reached a solution. They called their document *Opgjør*.

It is now time to consider for evaluation a few of the points about *Opgjør*. The first paragraph tackled the problem of the two forms used to define the doctrine of election:

The Union Committees of the Synod and the United Church, unanimously and without reservation, accept that doctrine of election which is set forth in Art. XI of the Formula of Concord, the so-called First Form ...and Pontoppidan's Truth unto Godliness..., the so-called Second Form of Doctrine.⁶

² Theodore A. Aaberg, *A City Set on a Hill* (Lake Mills, Iowa: Graphic Publishing Company, Inc., 1968), p. 46.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

It was nothing new for the Norwegian Synod to acknowledge the doctrine of election as presented in the two forms. This kind of acknowledgment, however, was new. In 1884 the synod had acknowledged the concept of election presented in the Second Form with reservations. In *Opgjør*, however, the synod's committee acknowledged the doctrine of election presented in both forms "without reservation." This in effect handed over to the "Anti-Missourians" in the United Church what the Norwegian Synod had refused to yield in the 1880's.

Paragraph four also contains a questionable statement. In that paragraph the Joint Committee declared:

... We have agreed to reject all errors which seek to explain away the mystery of election ...either in a synergizing or a Calvinizing manner ...every doctrine which ...would deprive God of His glory as only Savior or ...weaken man's sense of responsibility in relation to the acceptance or rejection of grace.⁷

What is so terrible about this paragraph is that it ascribes to natural man a sense or feeling of responsibility regarding the acceptance of grace. This cannot be, however, for natural man is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1). Only when a man has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit working through the Means of Grace can he be said to possess any spiritual sense or feeling. By that time he has already been converted. What paragraph four of *Opgjør* teaches is synergism, Professor Schmidt's old error. In the words of Pastor Aaberg:

The false teaching asserted in paragraph four corrupts the doctrines of sin and grace, and under such circumstances an orthodox church cannot even tolerate, much less accept "without reservation," the doctrine of election as presented in the Second Form.⁸

Actually, some fine things were said in paragraphs three and five of this document. The trouble is that the scriptural positions thus set forth had already been nullified by previous statements. *Opgjør* is a unionistic document that contains both true doctrine and false doctrine. The best example of this is in paragraphs four and five, in which synergism is first taught and then rejected just one paragraph later.

Many backers of the merger spoke of *Opgjør* as a document which settled the controversy between the Norwegian Synod and the United Church on the doctrine of election. We have already pointed out that it was a unionistic document containing both truth and falsehood. People now admit that the document was in fact a compromise. Nelson's description of it along with the attitude of those who made the agreement reads as follows:

The Opgjoer itself can best be described as the instrument of an ecclesiastical rapprochement rather than as an astute and flawless display of theological finality with regard to the doctrine of election. Both sides, eager for union and weary of conflict, sought desperately to find a way in which they could be delivered from the clutch of bitterness and each could join the other without giving up his own views. It was a case of the victory of heart over head.⁹

Not all the members of the Norwegian synod were wildly happy about *Opgjør*, however. After it had been agreed to there was still some evidence that the two church bodies still had doctrinal differences. A rather sizable minority rose up to oppose the document as it stood. They let it be known that they would not enter the new church body unless some changes were made in *Opgjør*. The leaders of this minority did come to an agreement, known as the "Austin Settlement," with the Joint Committee and recommended going in on the merger. Unfortunately they had been outmaneuvered and their entrance into the new body would not be under favorable conditions. No changes had actually been made in *Opgjør*, and this document was declared to be the basis for union. The confessional minority was being sucked into an unhealthy union which could only weaken their Scriptural foundation.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁹ E. Clifford Nelson, *The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian-Americans*, Vol. II (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960), p. 181.

There is one ray of light in this otherwise gloomy string of events. Not quite all of the minority of the Norwegian Synod joined in forming the new Norwegian Lutheran Church of America in June of 1917. A small minority of the minority refused to sacrifice their Scriptural and confessional principles. In June of 1918, thirteen pastors and a number of laymen organized the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church. The name was later changed to the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. These people were few, but they knew that since God was with them, their numbers weren't really important. After all, one plus God equals a majority. Praise be to our God that these Christians took their stand solely on His Word. May we always do the same, heeding God's holy Word rather than human arguments or feelings.

Bibliography

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