

THE NORTHWESTERN LUTHERAN AND
THE EIGHTEENTH AMENDMENT

Church History

Professor Fredrich

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Prepared by

Leon R. Ehlert

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11531 W. Seminary Drive, 6EW
Madison, Wisconsin

Prohibition. The name alone is enough to conjure up images of Al Capone and Frank Nitti gunning down members of a rival gang in an episode which would go down in history as the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. There have been few constitutional amendments that have caused as great a rift between government and the people as did the Eighteenth. The reasons behind the proposed "dry laws" were both political and moral. Forces as diverse as Bible belt Baptists and the Rockefeller clan championed the cause. However, since the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment by the subsequent Twenty-First Amendment, the call for abstinence from liquor has been popularly seen as primarily a movement of religious bent. The temperance movement had in mind the cleaning up of the moral decadence that was, at least in part, blamed on the abuse of alcohol.

What was the stance of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod during this period? By means of the official publication, The Northwestern Lutheran, we will see that, far from supporting the Eighteenth Amendment, the synod's leadership expressed grave doubts as to the motives and the possible results of the whole prohibition movement.

First, a thumbnail sketch of the events leading up to the ratification of the National Prohibition Act is necessary. The idea of prohibition cannot be ascribed as a particularly American notion. Recent events in the Persian Gulf and the continued zeal of Moslem Fundamentalism are clear indications that we are dealing with a world-wide movement.

In the United States, religious revivalism that characterized the 1820's and 30's gave rise to the first movements for state and local prohibition. The precedent for seeking temperance through law was set by a Massachusetts law, passed in 1838 and repealed just two years later, which prohibited sales of spirits in less than 15 gallon quantities.

The real move for national prohibition did not begin in earnest until after 1906. Several diverse forces culminated in a national movement that achieved its goal in 1919. The Anti-Saloon League led state prohibition drives of 1906 through 1913. During World War I, a temporary Wartime Prohibition Act was passed to save grain for use as food. In 1917, the resolution for submission to the National Prohibition Act received the necessary two-thirds vote in Congress. The amendment was ratified on January 29, 1919 and went into effect January 29, 1920. The law continued--with by no means full support--until its repeal by the Twenty-first Amendment on December 5, 1933.

There is no doubt that emotions ran high during the years immediately preceding the passage of the Volstead Act, as the Eighteenth Amendment was also known. Legitimate questions had to be asked concerning the validity of one section of the population dictating its moral standards upon another section. These were also questions that were being asked by rank and file Wisconsin Synod members. As I have stated previously, the temperance movement had its foundation and its strength from the revivalism of the preceding century. In a movement that was widely seen as being approved of, if not lead by the religious element in the

United States, how was the average WELS Lutheran supposed to act? It was to this question that The Northwestern Lutheran addressed itself beginning on April 21, 1917. In a series of articles and news briefs, The Northwestern Lutheran used its influence to guide its readers in the Biblical stance regarding the temperance movement.

The first article, entitled "Prohibition and the Saloon," ran a full two years before the amendment was ratified. One must remember that the issue was both a religious as well as an economic issue, a fact which the paper took great pains to clarify.

"The Northwestern Lutheran, as a religious paper, wishes to discuss the moral side of the liquor question only, and will leave the economic problems connected therewith for the government to solve to the best interests of the people."¹

With that, the paper began a battle to inform which would last the next four full years. However, it was not always able to avoid muddying the waters with articles that crossed over the line between religion and economics, particularly after the Volstead Act passed into law.

By its own admission, The Northwestern Lutheran declared the battle to be at least half moral, and as such, was quite correct in using Biblical passages to support its position following in the fine tradition of The Lutheran Confessions. The paper began a systematic approach to destroying the so-called Biblical support grounds which the "Puritanic church bodies"² had as they pushed the dry movement. Why was prohibition not something to be masqueraded as a religious question? "Prohibition, i.e., the

suppression of the manufacture, sale, and use of intoxicating liquor is not a moral duty, because it is not demanded in the Scriptures."3 The Wisconsin Synod was up against a movement that was very adept at trying to pass moral judgments on something that was clearly an adiaphoron, and in the process misused Scripture to further its own ends. It was to that point which the article first addressed itself.

What were to be made of the passages which seemed, at least when quoted by a prohibitionist, to condemn the use of alcohol?

Proverbs 23:29-34:

"Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? Those who linger over wine, who go to sample bowls of mixed wine. Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end, it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper. Your eyes will see strange sights and our mind imagine confusing things. You will be like one sleeping on the high seas, lying on top of the rigging. 'They hit me,' you will say, 'But I am not hurt! They beat me, but I don't feel it! When will I wake up so I can find another drink?'"

Passages like this and many others were used to make a personal choice seem like a moral one. It was precisely against that kind of poor exegesis that The Northwestern Lutheran tried to expose. A passage in seeming support of prohibition would be quoted and then examined to show the true point that the Holy Spirit was trying to impress on the reader. The tone of the article was very evangelical toward those who had honestly been misinformed by the religious leaders of the temperance movement.

However, the author was not afraid, in the tradition of Martin Luther to call a papal ass a papal ass. The statement by

an ex-Methodist minister, "If the Bible commends wine drinking and thus intemperance, the Lord Jesus cannot be my example,"⁴ was met with a justifiably harsh reply, "Thus we see of what perversion man is capable."⁵ However, at no time was The Northwestern Lutheran against the man who voluntarily abstained from intoxicating drink, provided of course, "He connects no false ideas of morality therewith."⁶

There was a real danger connected with being viewed as an anti-prohibitionist, and that was to be seen as a supporter of the abuse of alcohol. Christian liberty did not mean that one could abuse a gift from God either. This was amply demonstrated in the follow-up article, "Prohibition and the Saloon." The question was raised concerning the Lutheran Church's sanctioning of everything connected with liquor traffic. The article points out that as with so many gifts of God there is always the possibility of some form of abuse creeping in to an otherwise moral act. The editor states that in and of itself, there is nothing whatsoever wrong with the sale of alcohol. After all, how could the disciples have secured red wine for the Lord's Supper if they had not purchased it from someone?

But a Christian also has the responsibility not to engage in a business connected with so much immorality. "Drunkenness, disorder, noise, vile language, gambling, and fighting are common occurrences in a saloon."⁷ Add to that the fact that some saloons even contained dance halls, "which are veritable pitfalls for our young people."⁸ Viewing these facts one can see why The

Northwestern Lutheran wished to be on record as not supportive of any such goings on.

There was a very clear distinction made between simply exercising Christian liberty and the abuse of those liberties. First, any saloon which permitted acts which fell outside of civil law would be in direct opposition to the Fourth Commandment. Much must be said in praise of the tone of this particular article. It is neither legalistic nor is it soft on the sin that may arise from business connected with the maintenance of a bar. Furthermore, there were no sacred cows which were off limits for criticism. This is demonstrated in the indictment against beer picnics, which were held in cooperation with the local congregation. Christian admonishment is dealt out on those who abuse such gatherings in phrases such as, "The writer has seen . . . disgraceful scenes (drunkenness, disorder, and giving offense) more than once."9 The statements of The Northwestern Lutheran were not based upon the moral leanings of the writer, for he follows up by quoting Habakkuk 2:15, "Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors pouring it from a wineskin til they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies."

Although the furor over the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment took place over 70 years ago, the basic tenants regarding Christian sanctification have not changed, which is always the case when God's Word is the standard by which all action is judged. For instance, a Christian is allowed to enter a saloon provided he enter a reputable place⁶; however, it is pointed out that a pastor or teacher should not frequent

establishments because of the offense given to those of weaker faith.

But the question that was on everybody's mind was, of course, what position should a Christian take regarding the temperance movement. Was it a matter of being a Christian if one supported the Eighteenth Amendment or an unbeliever if one did not? One must remember that the articles quoted up to this point were written before the passage of the National Prohibition Act. The individual would, to a large extent, influence the passage of the bill. The Northwestern Lutheran capped the informational articles with a clearly written and strongly worded response to those Lutherans who wondered how they should vote.

"As this is an economic problem, he is not bound by any divine law to support it, but may do so, if he thinks it is for the best of the community. And nobody has the right to doubt his orthodoxy. We Lutherans firmly believe in the absolute separation of state and church. The church, therefore, should not be a political agitator as little as the state should be a religious reformer."¹⁰

That The Northwestern Lutheran had the courage to avoid jumping on the band wagon in support of a national ban on alcohol speaks well of the leaders of that time. For there was considerable pressure upon any religious organization to support the dry movement. "The first institution to which Anti-Saloon League men turned was the churches."¹¹ The leadership at the paper stood firm and would not knuckle under to pressure politics or social demands. The point was made clear; the leadership would follow the instruction of the Bible and not bow to the rules of men.

One more point which served to shed light on the rather daring position taken by The Northwestern Lutheran was the fact that the Wisconsin Synod was primarily of Germanic background. This was during a time when being German was, by no means, something that one would want to broadcast. The United States had entered the war on the side of the British, and against the Germans. This did not go unnoticed by the average citizen of non-Germanic descent. There was strong suspicion cast on German-Americans, "hyphenated Americans," Theodore Roosevelt called them.¹² Furthermore, the scene would shift from one of simple distrust to one of open hostility. There would come a time when "sauerkraut would be called 'liberty cabbage,' when the Metropolitan Opera would withdraw Wagner's Ring cycle, when strangers would kick dachshunds in the street."¹³ This was not a good time to be German, especially when expressing an opinion which was by no means popular with so-called red-blooded, all-American prohibitionists.

As the dry movement gained ground, by 1917 no less than 17 states had passed dry laws, a subtle change in the tone of the articles of The Northwestern Lutheran began to take place. No longer were the articles quite as impartial concerning the outcome of the movement. Serious questions were raised as to the ramifications of National Prohibition. One of the chief concerns expressed by the Wisconsin Synod in the event that the law passed was the status of communion wine. Would churches be allowed to purchase wine for the sacrament, or would that constitute a breaking of the law? This concern was raised in a June 21, 1917

article, "Sacramental Wine and the Prohibition Laws." A letter by the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Iowa asked the attorney general whether wine could be procured for the sacrament. The answer, wine could only be obtained through a registered pharmacist. Although the right of the church to hold communion with wine was affirmed, the danger was clear.

"Though the congregations are somewhat inconvenienced by this law, they are satisfied as long as they are able to obtain wine for the Altar, but there is a danger that the agitators for prohibition will not be content with the success they have won, but will attempt to restrain us from using fermented wine in the Lord's Supper."¹⁴

While the article once again condemned the abuse of alcohol, there seems to be a rising concern that the temperance movement could very easily become carried away and force its views upon those who opposed them.

The fears were by no means based on irrationality. During the previous temperance movement (1820's and 1830's), there was a real push to forbid the use of any alcohol, regardless of purpose. Those who espoused teetotaling (the complete absence of alcohol) put considerable pressure on churches to abstain from using wine for the sacrament. "By 1840 . . . seven percent of the congregations in New York State used unfermented wine."¹⁵ By 1880, the Methodist Episcopal Church, which had up until this time refused to go along with the teetotaling position, voted in favor of it. Nor was the position of The Northwestern Lutheran based solely on the past. A short three months after the periodical expressed its concerns, another article entitled, "We Told You So," related events as they were occurring in Oklahoma.

A problem arose when a local Roman Catholic Congregation appealed to the attorney general of that state for wine for use in the Mass. However, because Oklahoma was a "bone dry" state, the church was turned down. This article clearly marked the end of The Northwestern Lutheran's nonpartisan view of the fray concerning prohibition. From here on out the periodical pursued an every increasing tone of skepticism. An alarm was sounded against the "rabid prohibitionist"¹⁶ and the "prohibition fanatics"¹⁷ who would certainly go to the extreme of banning sacramental wine. The article went on to say that if the state were to ban all wine then the words of Acts 5:29 would apply, "Peter and the other apostles replied: 'We must obey God rather than men!'" Was bootlegging to be permitted? No, that was not the answer. Nor was it an option to covertly smuggle wine into the church, but the church, "must have the sacramental wine even if all the powers of earth and hell and the prohibition fanatics try to prevent it."¹⁸ The Northwestern Lutheran appealed to the judges to correct the injustice that was being inflicted on the Church. What was to be done in case the judges did not vote in favor of the churches? That possibility was left without reply, but the underlying tone of the article and the reference to Acts 5 left little doubt as to what had to be accomplished.

A rather long silence followed that first article which seriously questioned the whole idea of a National Prohibition Act and its consequences. However, on January 26, 1919, the Prohibition issue was back in the periodical, this time as front-page news. The interim of almost one and a half years served

only to move The Northwestern Lutheran's skepticism of the movement into hostility, but by this time it was too late. Just three days after the article appeared, the National Prohibition Act went from a movement to an amendment. The frustration of a battle seemingly lost raised the ire of the writer. No longer was Scripture used to support his views as had been done in the articles of the previous two years. The article quickly devolved into name calling and unfounded speculation which would have been best to avoid. The "us versus them" mentality shines forth in the sentence: "But evidently that [the passage of Prohibition] does not exhaust their energy or ambition."¹⁹ We read that the founder of the Anti-Saloon League has formally announced the new objective of the organization: "It is nothing less than the conquest of the whole world."²⁰

The article once again sounded forth, quite correctly, that the whole business of prohibition was a mix-up of church and state, but neglected to provide any passages to substantiate its position. Instead, a lengthy criticism from the "wets" was printed.

"In their swan song, the 'wets' are accusing three interests of being the power behind the dry movement. First, Rockefeller, which interest absorbs the corn output and by removing the brewer and distiller, hopes to buy all the corn at lowest prices. Secondly, the meat packers hope that cheap corn and grain will make cheap meat which in turn gives them increased profits; in addition, these interests are supposed to control the canning business of the country which enables them to furnish grape juice and other products to take the place of the vanished cheer. Thirdly, the manufacturers of certain prepared beverages, such as Coca-Cola, which is said to contain certain habit-forming drugs."²¹

Now, while The Northwestern Lutheran does not say that this is its view on the subject, it does not deny that the accusations against the Rockefellers and cattle-raisers could be true. What is truly a shame, however, is that the Editor failed to follow the path that was clearly charted by the paper in 1917, "The 'Northwestern Lutheran' as a religious paper wishes to discuss the moral side of the liquor question only, and will leave the economic problems connected therewith for the government to solve to the best interests of the people." 22

If only that statement had been adhered to in the case of the January 26, 1919 article! One can see why frustration and fear would seize those in opposition to the Eighteen Amendment. A very dangerous cat had been left out of the bag, church and state had begun to mingle. Unfortunately, one could never be sure where such a monster would lead, but one fact was sure: The Northwestern Lutheran would voice its opposition.

One may safely say that the articles concerning Prohibition can be divided up into two separate groups. The first group consisted in articles published in 1917, before the Eighteenth Amendment was ratified; and the second, a group of articles published from 1919-20. The articles differ in both style and purpose. The first set was evangelical and was clearly set up to be informational. The second set can also be understood as informational, but the tone is distinctly different; it is harsh and sarcastic.

Under the title "Tea Must Go"! the periodical began its assault on the new law. The fuel--problems with a tea house in England.

"The papers report the arrest in London of a woman who owns and conducts a number of tea rooms, the charge being that her shops have been the scene of much shameless flirting, hugging and kissing, thus constituting a grave menace to public morals."²³

The reply, "And we had been lead to believe that alcohol is the root of all evil...we must work on a new slogan, Tea must go!"²⁴ Biting phrases such as "Many people today think if they can pass laws enough we can force men to be kind and generous."²⁵ began to appear as did the almost constant reports of short-comings concerning the failure of the Eighteenth Amendment to accomplish its designated purpose. In less than one calendar year, starting on January 26, 1919, six articles and news briefs strongly denouncing the prohibitionist and his "religious intolerance"²⁶ appeared in The Northwestern Lutheran.

The tone is clearly negative, but what can be said in either defense or explanation for this series of articles that differed so radically from those of 1917?

There is no expressed purpose stated as to why The Northwestern Lutheran continued to publish such biting articles, but one can deduce that they were working for some sort of limits to the new law. While it is true that the Eighteenth Amendment had become law, that did not mean that the temeperence movement was over. The Anti-Saloon League was still pushing for stronger and stronger laws designed to create a "dry" nation. One must keep in mind that the National Prohibition Act did not ban wine

for communion, but that was something which could come about if some of the more radical prohibitionists had their way, as was demonstrated in Iowa.

On September 21, 1919, the periodical published an article which vindicated the alarm the paper had sounded in 1917 concerning the banning of wine for the sacrament.

"The manufacture and sale of sacramental wine must stop in Iowa, Attorney General Havner declares. It matters not if it is to be used in connection with religious services, its manufacture or sale is in violation of Section 2382 of the supplemental supplement to the code."27

Why continue to print biting articles against the Volstead Act even though the law had already been passed into law? Simply to stop the law from becoming any more restrictive, especially concerning the right of churches to use sacramental wine. Was it wise to run those articles? That is a hard question to answer. Separated from the events of 1919 by more than 70 years, it is easy to say that The Northwestern Lutheran erred by using such a sarcastic tone concerning the shortcomings of the Eighteenth Amendment. However, these were very turbulent times and there was a real danger of oppression. Possibly, The Northwestern Lutheran was announcing its own movement with the following editorial comment. What could happen if church and state became entangled?

"Religious intolerance, the supremacy of one religious denomination over all others, a constant conflict between church and state with attending persecutions; in short, a return to the dark middle ages. It is therefore the solemn duty of every American citizen to guard against any violation of this principle of American government, the complete separation of church and state."28

There is one other factor that seems to indicate that The Northwestern Lutheran was not just crying after a loss. It was the fact that the paper did not publish any articles denouncing Prohibition after it was clear that the Eighteenth Amendment would fail. If we assume the periodical's reason for publishing the scathing articles was only self-pity then why keep silent when the victory was in sight? I believe the later round of articles covering the years 1919 and 1920 could have been more evangelical. However, I will not go so far as to state they were either wrong or a waste of time.

The National Prohibition Act gave rise to tremendous social changes. Whether one, in retrospect, believes the idea to be a good one does not matter. One point is clear, The Northwestern Lutheran did a fine job of informing its readers as to the pros and cons of a movement that can still capture the imagination even 70 years later.

ENDNOTES

1. "Prohibition and the Saloon, Part I" The Northwestern Lutheran, April 21, 1917, p. 61.
2. Ibid., p. 61.
3. Ibid., p. 61.
4. Ibid., p. 63.
5. Ibid., p. 63.
6. Ibid., p. 63.
7. "Prohibition and the Saloon, Part II," The Northwestern Lutheran, May 17, 1917, p. 68.
8. Ibid., p. 68.
9. Ibid., p. 68.
10. Ibid., p. 69.
11. Jack S. Blocker, Jr., American Temperance Movements, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1989, p. 102.
12. Donald Barr Chidsey, On and Off the Wagon, Cowles Book Co., New York, 1969, p. 66.
13. Ibid., p. 66.
14. "Sacramental Wine and the Prohibition Laws," The Northwestern Lutheran, June 21, 1917, p. 92.
15. Blocker, p. 24.
16. "We Told You So," The Northwestern Lutheran, September 27, 1917, p. 139.
17. Ibid., p. 140.
18. Ibid., p. 140.
19. "Prohibition Amendment is Winning," The Northwestern Lutheran, January 26, 1919, p. 9.
20. Ibid., p. 9.
21. Ibid., p. 10.

22. "Prohibition and the Saloon," The Northwestern Lutheran, April 21, 1917, p. 61.
23. "Ted Must Go!" The Northwestern Lutheran, February 9, 1919, p. 20.
24. Ibid., p. 20.
25. "Wine is Denied for Sacrament," The Northwestern Lutheran, September 21, 1919, p. 146.
26. "Tea Must Go!" The Northwestern Lutheran, February 9, 1919, p. 20.
27. "Wine is Denied for Sacrament" The Northwestern Lutheran, September 21, 1919, p. 146.
28. "Tea Must Go!" The Northwestern Lutheran, February 9, 1919, p. 21.

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- "Drink, Churches, Movies, etc." INL, January 11, 1920.
- "In Spite of Prohibition," INL, January 11, 1920.
- "It Works Both Ways," INL, January 11, 1920.
- "The Prohibition Amendment is Winning," INL, January 26, 1919.
- "Prohibition and the Saloon, Part I," INL, April 21, 1917.
- "Prohibition and the Saloon, Part II," INL, May 17, 1917.
- "Sacramental Wine and the Prohibition Laws," INL, June 21, 1917.
- "Tea Must Go!" INL, February 9, 1919.
- "We Told You-So," INL, September 27, 1917.
- "Where Laws Fail," INL, September 21, 1919.
- "Wine is Denied for Sacrament," INL, September 21, 1919.