

Grace and Peace:
the Election Controversy in Oshkosh, WI.

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If someone at another seminary were writing a paper on the Synodical Conference election controversy of the 1880s he would undoubtedly regard Dr. C. F. W. Walther of the Missouri Synod as the chief opponent of Prof. F. A. Schmidt. These two men carried on the greatest part of the literary fighting in the controversy and it was they who finally became the champions of the two viewpoints which fought it out in the Synodical Conference. But for the study of our own synod's history a more important opponent of Prof. Schmidt was Pastor Christoph Dowidat, in 1882 the pastor of the Friedensgemeinde in Oshkosh. Though he was never involved in the literary controversy with Schmidt and was not present at the 1882 Synodical Conference meeting which refused to acknowledge Schmidt as the delegate of the Norwegian Synod, it was the conflict with Prof. Schmidt in his own congregation which brought the Wisconsin Synod into the middle of the controversy and which provided one of the cases which figured prominently in the rejection of Schmidt at the Synodical Conference sessions.

I. Biographies of Schmidt and Dowidat

The story of Prof. Schmidt's varied life is so well known that only a brief summary needs to be given here. He was born in Germany, but at the age of four he was brought to America by his mother after his father's death. He was educated in the schools of the Missouri Synod and continued in them until he completed his education at the seminary in 1857. He had planned after finishing his studies to return to Europe, but was instead called to a congregation in New York. In 1857 he was accepted as a member of the Missouri Synod. In 1859 he moved to Baltimore. During this time he advocated the wider use of English, a position which put him on the radical edges of his synod. In 1861 he was called by the Norwegian Synod to teach at their seminary, and in 1872 as their professor at St. Louis. In 1876 he moved to the newly-founded Norwegian seminary at Madison. During this time he had remained a loyal advocate of Missouri's doctrine and a friend of his old teacher, Walther.

In 1880, however, he began to publish Altes und Neues, a magazine with the express purpose of opposing Walther's teaching on election. Some have attributed this to pique at not being called to fill a vacancy on the St. Louis faculty as a full professor in 1878. As

Koehler points out, however, Schmidt had already opposed Walther privately at an earlier date.¹ It seems more charitable to believe that Schmidt was actuated by a real concern for what he believed was the truth rather than by bitterness toward Walther or the Missouri Synod, though that may account for some of the harshness with which the controversy was carried on. In 1886 Schmidt was called to the Northfield school of what, in 1887, was organized as the Anti-Missouri Brotherhood. He was involved in the 1890 founding of the United Norwegian Lutheran Church in America,² teaching first at Augsburg Seminary and then at the UNLCA seminary until 1912. He lived until 1928, never withdrawing his opposition to the Missouri Synod and its doctrine.³

The life of Pastor Christoph Dowidat is far less well known than Prof. Schmidt's. He was born June 19, 1843 near Pilkallen in East Prussia.⁴ At his confirmation he expressed a desire to enter heathen mission work, and was to be sent to Koenigsberg and Barmen by the local mission society. The Langenberg mission society gave him the opportunity of coming to America for work

¹John Philipp Koehler, The History of the Wisconsin Synod (The Protestant Conference, 1970), p 157.

²Jens Christian Jensson, American Lutheran Biography (Milwaukee; Houtcamp & Sons, 1890), p 674.

³Theologische Quartalschrift, v. 25, no. 4, p 292-293.

⁴Northwestern Lutheran, Sept. 20, 1925, p. 301.

in the Wisconsin Synod, and in January, 1867 he arrived at the Seminary in Watertown. Because of his previous training he passed his examination as a candidate by July 21, 1868. Upon his graduation he served at Centerville (Manitowoc Co.) for 6 years and 4 months. From there he went to Fort Atkinson for a period of 6 years and 10 months. He then went to Oshkosh where he served the Friedensgemeinde¹ for nine months and Grace Church for over 39 years.² He died on August 24, 1925.³ His retirement from the ministry in Oshkosh was due mostly to advanced age, although there was also a desire for a pastor more fluent in English. During his career Pastor Dowidat served the synod as secretary of the Board of Regents of Northwestern College and the seminary, as treasurer of the synod, as a member of the commission for Indian Missions, as visitor of the Winnebago Conference and as a collector of funds for the synodical debt.⁴

II. Beginnings of the controversy

In 1877 at the meeting of the Western District of the Missouri Synod at Altenburg, Perry County, Walther

¹Ev.-Luth. Gemeindeblatt, September 27, 1925, p 312.

²Ibid.

³Northwestern Lutheran, loc. cit.

⁴Ev.-Luth. Gemeindeblatt. loc. cit.

presented a series of these on election. This was not the first time this doctrine had been considered; questions had arisen as early as 1872-1874 in a joint Missouri-Wisconsin conference.¹ But it appears to have been the publication of Walther's theses in the district proceedings that moved Schmidt to action.² His reply to Walther was the publication, in January, 1880, of the first issue of Altes und Neues. The Vorwort to issue number one left no doubt of Schmidt's position and purpose:

Der Grund, jedoch, weshalb wir gerade jetzt unser "Altes und Neues" ausgeben lassen, ist ein sehr specieller. In den Publicationen der Missourisynode, welche ja nicht ohne Grund als die Bannertraegerin unserer Synodal-conferenz angesehen wird, ist in den letzten Jahren eine Lehre von der Gnadenwahl ausfuehrlich dargelegt und vertheidigt worden, die wir nicht anders als fuer schrift- und bekenntnis-widrigen, calvinisirenden Irrthum erkennen koennen. Mehr oder minder deutlich Ansaetze zu dieser faelschen Lehre finden sich zwar theilweise schon frueher; in den beiden juengsten Berichten des westlichen Distrikts [1877 und 1879] ist jedoch diese nach unserer festen Ueberzeugung irrfige Lehre an ihrer vollen Reise gekommen. Der Bericht von 1879 hat zugleich alle diejenigen, welche bisher sich in engeren bruederlichen Kreise der neuen Lehre entgegensetzen, oeffentlich als Gegner der Missourisynode, als Vernunftleute, die Gott zum Luegner machen, als gefaehrliche Irrlehrer und ketzerische Menschen gebrandmarkt und sich obendrein mannifache Miszdeutungen und

¹Koehler, op. cit., p. 157

²Ibid., p. 158.

Einstellungen ihres Standpunktes, sowie feindselige Ausfäelle gegen dieselbe erlaubt. Man wird es nun als einem dieser "Gegner" daher nicht veruebeln koennen, wenn wir das ausgesprochene Verdammungsurtheil fuer ein ungerechtes erklæaren und nach Kraefte unserer lutherischen Haut uns wehren selbst abgesehen von dem direkten Anathema, das ueber uns bereits gefaellt ist, wuerden wir uns in unserem guten Rechte glauben, gegen die oeffentlich vorgetragene und festgehaltene falsche Lehre nunmehr die Sturmgloëcke zu laeuten. Der Bericht von 1879 hat uns jedoch mit seiner officiellen Kriegeserklærung unsere Aufgabe bedeutend erleichtert und mit Abbrechung der bisher gepflogenen Privatverhandlungen uns zu offenem Kampfe herausgefordert. Wohlan, so sei es denn in Gottes Namen Kampf, offener und entschiedener Kampf gegen diesen neuen Crypto-Calvinismus, welcher sich als alleinberechtigt ansieht und mit angestregten Kraefte den schon gewonnen Grund und Boden¹ zu behaupten, sowie neuen zu gewinnen sucht.

The remainder of volume 1 continues in the same fashion. Pastor Allwardt, who had been involved in the earlier Watertown discussions² and who will be encountered again in Oshkosh, contributed "Zur Lehre von der Gnadenwahl" and "Die Absolute Wahl" among others.

As a member of the Synodical Conference, the Wisconsin Synod had to make a decision and come out on one side or the other. It did so in the April 15, 1880 issue of the Gemeinde-Blatt. That issue contained an article, presumably by Hoenecke, "Zur Lehre von der

¹Altes und Neues, vol 1, no 1, Jan., 1880, p. 1-2.

²Koehler, op. cit., p. 157.

Gnadenwahl"¹, in which the doctrine of election is presented, but without any reference to Schmidt of Altes und Neues. It is nevertheless obvious that the article is a reply to him and his publication in light of the dates involved. It appears that this is the only reference to Schmidt through June of 1882, although brief references are made occasionally to similar developments in the Ohio Synod.²

This article was not, however, the first time that the situation had come to the synod's attention. The 1879 synodical pastoral conference resolved to instruct the Synodical Conference delegates to ask for correction and clarification of some statements made by Missouri, a request to which the latter synod agreed. After the article, in 1881, the faculties of the Synodical Conference seminaries met for a colloquy at the Wauwatosa Seminary.⁴ In the same year Prof. Hoenecke was asked by the synod convention to prepare theses on election for the pastoral conference. The delegates to the Synodical Conference were also instructed on the actions they were to take if a controversy arose at the meeting.

¹Ev.-Luth. Gemeindeblatt, vol. 15, no. 16, pp. 121-122.

²Ibid., vol. 16, no. 6, pp. 46-47.

³Koehler, op. cit., p. 158.

⁴Ibid., p. 159.

The 1882 synod convention was the one which dealt most directly with the controversy. The convention was in La Crosse and some sessions, particularly the presentation of the doctrinal essay, were held jointly with the Minnesota Synod. The essay was presented by Prof. A. Graebner on the basis of three theses concerning conversion. The Gemeindeblatt, in reporting on the convention, explained the essay:

Die Behandlung dieser Lehre war hoechst wichtig und zeitgemaesz, weil in unseren Tagen viele, die behaupten, sie seien die Vertheidiger der lutherischen Lehre, wir Synoden der Synodalconferenz hingegen seien von der Lehre unserer Kirche abgefallen, falsche und gefaehrliche Dinge in Bezug auf diese Lehre in Aufnahme zu bringen bemueht sind.

The essay specifically rejected the expression "Wahl in Ansehung des Glaubens." Both synods accepted the essay by a standing vote. Two pastors, one teacher, and the delegate from the congregation of one of the pastors rose in opposition and a third pastor indicated that he was as yet unclear. Finally, Pastors Klindworth, Althof, Vollmar and Siegrist withdrew from the synod before the convention closed.² Pastor Klindworth, who had been engaged in controversy on this doctrine prior to the convention, was specifically singled out in a

¹Gemeindeblatt, vo. 17, no. 21, p. 161.

²Ibid., p. 162.

citation offered by Hoenecke. The adoption of the essay naturally resulted in his departure and also showed the mind of the synod on the doctrinal question.

III. Gnadenwahlstreit in Oshkosh

Pastor Dowidat of Oshkosh had, of course, been at the synod convention. During the course of the convention he had preached for one of the seven worship services which were conducted.¹ But during the time he was in La Crosse, the situation in his home congregation was changing rapidly. While he was away the election matter was being agitated in the congregation.² By the time he returned the opponents had apparently determined to dispute the issue in the congregational meeting which was to be held so that the pastor could report to the congregation on the events of the convention. When the lay delegate delivered his report to the meeting, Pastor Dowidat objected to it, and said that it had been altered. This precipitated such a disturbance that the pastor was barely able to continue speaking. The meeting was enlivened by the anti-election group chanting,

"Wir wollen keine Gnadenwahl! Wir wollen keine

¹Gemeindeblatt, vol. 17, no. 21, p. 162.

²Verhandlungen der neunten Versammlung der evangelisch-lutherischen Synodal Konferenz von Nord-Amerika zu Chicago, Ill. (St. Louis: Lutherische Concordia-Verlag, 1882), p. 34.

Gnådenwahl!"¹ The duration of this demonstration of enthusiasm is, alas, not recorded. The meeting returned to enough order that a majority resolution was passed, over the objections of the minority and the pastor, to secure Schmidt or Allwardt's help.²

Faced with this resolution Dowidat communicated with Schmidt and Allwardt and, apparently, with the officials of the Wisconsin Synod. To Schmidt he communicated the information

dasz derselbe eine Einladung von einer Majoritaet erhalten werde, er hoffe aber, dasz Prof. Schmidt so viel Respekt vor Gottes Wort haben werde, dasz derselbe nicht trotz seines Protestes in seine Gemeinde eingreifen werde.³

His letter Allwardt apparently was similar. Prof. Schmidt did not reply at all. Allwardt answered, "Dasz versteht sich, dasz ich komme usw."⁴ The appeal to Synod was answered by the presence of Prof. Graebner and President Bading at the next meeting. Up until this point no charges of false doctrine had been made against Pastor Dowidate, and a sermon he preached on the same Sunday had been approved even by the opposition party.⁵

¹Verhandlungen der...Ev.-Luth. Synodal Konferenz (St. Louis: Lutherische Concordia-Verlag, 1882), p. 34.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 35.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

In spite of that, when the time for the next meeting arrive, "erschießen beide, Schmidt und Allwardt, mit einem Arm voll Buechern."¹ Pastor Dowidat again registered objections, joined by Graebner and Bading, citing God's Word and quotations from Luther. It was apparently during this discussion that Pastor Dowidat said, "Da muesztet ihr mich ja erst absetzen, ehe ihr andere Personen zu Hilfe rufen koennt."² The intention of the Wisconsin Synod men apparently was to force Schmidt and Allwardt to answer the protests brought against their presence. Schmidt, however, returned to the doctrinal issue and justified his presence there, among other things citing his selection as a delegate to the upcoming meeting of the Synodical Conference.³ Finally this meeting, too, was closed in disorder and another scheduled for fourteen days later.⁴

It was at this meeting that the final rupture in the congregation occurred. Schmidt and Allwardt were present again for this meeting; no mention is made in the Synodical Conference proceedings of the Wisconsin men other than Dowidat. It was at this meeting that Pastor Dowidat's earlier remark that his own removal

¹Verhandlungen...der Ev.-luth. Synodal Konferenz
p. 35.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 41.

⁴Ibid., p. 35.

from office preceding the securing of outside help was used against him. Apparently the majority of the congregation was already in agreement with Schmidt and Allwardt, but uncertain how to proceed. Pastor Allwardt reminded them of Pastor Dowidat's remark and told the meeting, "Pastor Dowidat hat euch ja selbst den Weg, gewiesen, den ihr zu gehen habt."¹ Dowidat's statement had apparently been made originally simply to indicate the impropriety of the procedure of calling in others, as Allwardt must have realized. His willingness to use a chance remark to trap Dowidat does not put him in a good light: one hopes it was a momentary slip. Acting on this advice the congregation voted to depose Dowidat and also to withdraw from the Wisconsin Synöd.² One of the congregation's teachers, L. Gruber, also withdrew.³

The minority who had opposed this move was not small. By comparing the statistics for the Friedens-gemeinde in 1882⁴ with those of the Gandengemeinde for 1883⁵, it would appear that about one-third of the congregation was involved. This minority withdrew from

¹Synodical Conference proceedings, 1882, p. 35.

²Ibid.

³Verhandlungen der zweiunddreissigsten Versammlung der deutschen Ev.-Luth. Synöde von Wisconsin u.a.S., p. 15.

⁴Ibid., 1882, p. 88.

⁵Ibid., 1883, p. 62.

their old congregation their new congregation, the Gnadengemeinde, two blocks away, with Dowidat as their pastor. Teacher Gruel remained with the new congregation.¹ By the 18th of December they had erected a new church and were able to hold their dedication service.²

IV. Wider Significance of the Oshkosh Case.

The most obvious effects of the controversy in Oshkosh were, of course, those felt within the congregations. The split of a congregation on any issue always produces a harshness which remains for a time after the controversy itself has come to an end. Some of the older members of Grace congregation recall that their parents, referring to the tumultuous meetings which preceded the break in the congregation, referred to Peace congregation as the "Knueppelgemeinde." But the case also had consequences outside of the Oshkosh area.

First of all, it definitely decided the Wisconsin Synod's stand in the election controversy. As was demonstrated in part II of this paper the synod had already expressed its agreement with Missouri's position. But this sort of actual case of interference

¹Gemeindeblatt, vol. 18, no. 9, p. 71.

²Ibid.,

in the internal affairs of the congregations of the synod no doubt helped to decide many in firm opposition to Schmidt and the other proponents of his doctrine, especially in combination with similar incidents at Green Bay and Nekimi, both of which Schmidt apparently was involved in at the same time as his visit to Oshkosh.¹

Secondly, this case was one of the bases on which Schmidt was denied his seat as a delegate at the 1882 meeting of the Synodical Conference. In the meeting the Norwegian Synod delegates contended that the Synodical Conference was the forum in which doctrinal discussions were to be carried out. In the debate on receiving Schmidt it was agreed that false doctrine per se would not exclude anyone from being heard as long as there was still hope that by brotherly admonition he could be won for the truth. But it was said that Schmidt's actions in publishing Altes und Neues and in interfering in other synods had constituted a disruption of fellowship on his part which must be repented of before discussion of the doctrinal points could begin. In this latter point

¹Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1883, p. 15.

²Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1882, pp. 31-52.

the Oshkosh case was dealt with at greater length than any other.¹

Finally, the entire election controversy brought the synods remaining in the Synodical Conference closer together. It might have seemed more logical for Wisconsin to side with Ohio, Iowa and others than with Missouri.² In spite of that, Wisconsin did side with Missouri. This undoubtedly made the two synods even more aware of their agreement with one another. The similar cases which had occurred in the Minnesota Synod, coming so closely after the joint convention of those two synods, also served to strengthen the ties there, so that the synods remaining in the Synodical Conference after 1882 undoubtedly were drawn closer together by the controversy than they had been before.

¹Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1882, p. 34-35.

²Koehler, op. cit., p. 158.

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