

A NORWEGIAN JUSTIFIES MISSOURI'S REJECTION OF THE CHICAGO THESIS

Ron Baerbock  
Wis. Lutheran Seminary  
Church history  
Feb. 26, 1973

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library  
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W  
Mequon, Wisconsin

## A NORWEGIAN JUSTIFIES MISSOURI'S REJECTION OF THE CHICAGO THESIS

No matter what Lutheran periodical one reads from the first two decades of the twentieth century, one is continually confronted with the cry of Lutheran unity. The cry goes out to put aside all personal differences and join hands in common unity. Some sought unity only on the basis of complete doctrinal agreement; others were willing to forgo doctrine and unite because of the common name they held and perhaps the common heritage from which they had developed. This paper will deal with one aspect of that early age of unity; namely, the "Chicago Thesis," looking specifically at the doctrine of election. We will primarily deal with Missouri's rejection of those thesis and show that their rejection was justified when viewed in the light of what happened before and after the "Chicago Thesis" was drawn up. Specifically we will take a close look at H.C. Stub and his efforts at church union. It is Stub who demonstrates that the language of the "Chicago Thesis" was not strong enough on the point of election to prohibit the uniting of various views on election at such conferences as the one at Minneapolis. But more on these developments later.

Six times between 1918 and 1920 official committees representing the Joint Ohio, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Missouri Synods met for doctrinal discussions. The doctrines which received the most attention at the meeting were the doctrines of conversion and election. Between 1920 and 1922 the committees of the same synods again met several times, this time with representatives of the Buffalo Synod taking part. The conference finally adopted various thesis and antithesis on the doctrines of conversion and election. After these actions were taken by the committee, it was decided to put the resolutions drawn up into the field and have the pastors and congregations study and debate the issues. After the synod members were familiar with them, then they would go to the synod itself for action and possible rati

fication.

As one might expect in a matter such as this, which included a wide variety of people and synods with different backgrounds and fields of thought, there were varied reactions. The Joint Ohio Synod, without much delay, adopted the report of its intersynodical committee, thus endorsing the thesis. Missouri on the other hand was wary about the thesis and took its good natured time in making a decision. Pending the action of the Missouri Synod on the election thesis, the intersynodical committee continued to meet. They took up other doctrines such as ministry, antichrist etc. The committees, which worked since 1918, finally reached an agreement in 1925 in a formulation known as the "Chicago Thesis." These thesis were then presented to the synods for entering into fellowship relations.

When the Missouri Synod's committee presented the "Chicago Thesis" to the 1926 convention, the committee itself questioned whether the thesis were adequate to serve as a basis for fellowship. After hearing a report on the reaction of pastors and congregations to the articles on conversion and election, the convention decided that these thesis could not be accepted in their present form. The convention asked that changes be made in the thesis and appointed a committee to study them and report at the next convention.

The Thirty-Fourth Regular Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States met again in 1929. The recommendation of the examining committee for the intersynodical thesis was as follows:

Your Committee finds itself compelled to advise Synod to reject these thesis as a possible basis for union with the synods of Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo. Since all chapters and a number of paragraphs are inadequate. At times they do not touch upon the point of controversy; at times they are so phrased that both parties can find in them their own opinion; at times they incline more to the position of our opponents than to our own.

One of the complaints of the committee was that the language was not suf-

<sup>1</sup> Proceedings of the Thirty-Fourth Regular Convention, Ev. Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, 1929. "IV. Constitutional Matters," p.110.

ficiently simple to be understood by laymen and this was an unconditional necessity in a confessional thesis. The Committee was not satisfied especially with the election article labeled as "C." They reported:

The scriptural doctrine of the universal will of grace is not separated clearly from the doctrine of election by grace. One gains the impression that election is included in the universal will of grace and concerns persons only in so far as it decrees that those shall enter heaven who, according to the foreknowledge of God, already believe.<sup>2</sup>

The Committee also contended that the attempted antithesis was a flop in connection with explaining "intuitu fidei."

I feel that the real reason for Missouri's rejection of the attempt at Lutheran Church union is found in the unionistic tendencies which had already taken place in the Lutheran Church. The Norwegian "Opgjør" was a straw that broke the back of the seriousness of the "Chicago Thesis." I feel that this Norwegian document, and specifically one man; namely, Dr. Stub, were really indirectly responsible for Missouri's rejection, and at the same time they proved that Missouri's strong position was the only right course to take on the "Chicago Thesis" in light of the election article.

Hans Gerhard Stub was born February 23, 1849, at Muskego, Wisconsin. He had the privilege of studying at Cathedral School, Bergen, Norway. He later studied at Concordia College at Fort Wayne and graduated in 1872 from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. His first pastorate was in Minneapolis, and some years later, he became a professor at Luther Seminary, taking two years of leave to study at the University of Leipzig. He continued his teaching career at Luther College in 1896, and from 1900 to 1917 he was back at Luther Seminary. Dr. Stub began to make his presence known within the synod. In 1905 he was elected as Vice-President of the Norwegian Synod and became its President in 1910. He became a man who was well known throughout Lutheranism and especially in union attempts. He was the first president of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.111.

National Lutheran Council and preached the opening sermon at the Eisenach World Conference in 1923.

It is this talented Dr. Stub who became a controversial figure and a disappointing leader in the forming of the "Opgj/r," disappointing at least from the view of pure doctrinally minded Lutherans. In the course of history, the Norwegian Church had become split into three groups: the Norwegian Ev. Lutheran Church of America, the United Norwegian Lutheran Church in America, and the Hauge Norwegian Ev. Lutheran Synod. Attempts at union had been hinted at before, but it was hard to find a formula for union when old differences and problems kept cropping up. When Dr. Stub became the President of the Norwegian Synod, rumors of union were stronger than they had ever been before. In 1905 the three synods appointed committees to deal with the union efforts. In 1906 the committee reported agreement on the doctrine of absolution, involving the ministry, and on the role of lay activity in church life. In 1908 the committees reported agreement on the doctrines of the call and of conversion. But they were still hung up on election.

When Dr. Stub became president of the Norwegian Synod in 1910, he became directly connected with the work of the committees and took a very active part in the debates, since the unity of the Norwegians was a goal that was very close to his heart. Even though he strongly favored the union, yet he was very demanding concerning the doctrine on which the union would be formulated. His strong doctrinal tendencies, however, would not last. In Church union Stub strongly objected "to works of love serving as marks of the Church." He objected to the statement that "no single group of Christians has ever possessed all the attributes of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church." Dr. Stub would not go along with bodies of Lutherans uniting merely on the basis of a subscription to the Lutheran Confessions without further doctrinal discussions. His chief objection was uniting with other church bodies merely on the listing of eight doctrinal principles without stressing the trinity,

*Handwritten note:*  
Lutherans  
minded in  
predominance

the Scriptures as inspired and inerrant and the Lord's Supper.<sup>3</sup> Stub was opposed to any cooperation with other religious groups that did not involve agreement on all of the doctrines peculiar to Lutheranism.

The Norwegian Synod under the leadership of Stub had one idea of election, and the United Church under the leadership of President Dahl held another. The United Church held the "intuitu fidei" idea of election while Stub backed the Missouri or Biblical form of election. At one of the meetings, Dr. Stub read a statement to the group that expressed the position of the Norwegian Synod as that of adherence to Article XI of the Formula of Concord, which dealt with election. But later on he added a statement which revealed a crack that was developing and would later widen in his strong defence of pure Lutheran doctrine. Stub said, "However, the synod did not consider the use of the second form (intuitu fidei) as a cause for division."<sup>4</sup>

Even when Stub made this concession, President Dahl still charged that his stand on election was unbiblical and un-Lutheran. An argument erupted, and Stub threatened to withdraw from the meeting. The Norwegian delegation withdrew on the grounds, as Stub said, that the argument had now developed into a matter of conscience rather than form. Stub continued to fight against the anti-Missouri view of Schmidt, who had fostered the second form of election.

But, despite Stub's strong expressions against Schmidt, he was beginning to be labeled as a "liberal," when judged against the standards of certain elements within the synod. By no means was Stub, as President, representing only liberal Lutherans, but there was also a conservative element, ~~which~~ I feel, he favored <sup>The liberals</sup> in order to obtain union in the end. For the time, however, Stub's liberal tendencies only expressed themselves in his earnest desire to see the church united. For this he worked unceasingly, yet he remained

<sup>3</sup> Frederick K. Wentz, Lutherans In Concert. Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968, p.28.

<sup>4</sup> Nelson, The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian Americans. Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960, vol.II, p.157.

within the framework of the Synod's doctrinal position.

Dr. Stub began to see the fears and opposition that was beginning to mount in his own church body over the two forms of election found in the "Opgjør." He now found it necessary to quote a statement prepared by Pastors Nordby and Tangjerd of the United Church's committee to try and alleviate some of those fears. Since he realized that with a good conscience one could not vote for the two forms of the article on election when he really only believed in the one form, Stub suggested a clarification to the committee. He suggested that under the discussion of this point (election), the committee agree to explain as follows:

- 1) That the expression does not speak of accepting the two forms, but of the acceptance of that doctrine which is expressed in two forms;
- 2) that the meaning of the paragraph is that, in spite of the differences in presentation, everyone should be free to use the form which his own conscience or conviction dictates within the frame fixed by the Opgjør itself, without any strictures on fellowship or recognition as a good Lutheran.<sup>5</sup>

The United Church noticed the seemingly relaxed attitude of Stub and immediately accepted the explanation that Stub gave. No longer was Stub filling<sup>7</sup> the conservative element and looking to the beliefs of Missouri, but now he was trying to steer his church between Missouri's thinking on doctrine and the impatience of the United Church. In Church history, a steering between something, especially doctrines, for the sake of union, is dangerous. Stub said in his message to the districts of the Norwegian Synod in 1912: "To demand more than the Opgjør would be tantamount to stretching the bow so taut that it would break."<sup>6</sup> What Stub was saying was that if there was going to be a union of the churches, and he wanted one now at all costs, the present statement and explanation of election was all that they could expect.

Soon after this, Stub and Ylvisaker dared to wander into hostile territory,

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.186.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.191.

when they came to Saginaw to present their views and hopes to the Synodical Conference. When they left, there were no banners of praise or laud applause. Immediately the Synodical Conference in, "An Appeal to the Synod," requested that the Norwegian Synod give up the second form of election. Stub was attacked by Professor Schaller in Theologische Quartalschrift and by the editor of the Lehre und Wehre. Because of this public attack, Stub was outraged and in effect declared war. This may have made him even more determined to get the "Opgjør" passed, no matter what he had to forfeit.

Dr. Stub watched a minority begin to form in his own Norwegian Synod against the "Opgjør." In 1912, therefore, the stage was set for a choice to be made between the minority and the majority report. Dr. Stub pleaded for the majority report in saying: "I urge you as strongly as possible.....: do not vote for the minority report, but vote for the majority report! Nothing less is involved than the honor of the Norwegian Synod and the cause of union."<sup>7</sup> The majority report passed on a vote of 394 to 106.

In 1917, the Norwegian Synod, the Hauge Synod, and the United Church met and consummated the "Madison Agreement" (Opgjør). It was a happy day for Dr. Stub, but a sad day for conservative and doctrinally minded Lutherans. The "Madison Agreement" consisted of thesis for the settlement of differences which had existed since 1880 among the Norwegian Lutherans in the doctrines of election and conversion. The three synods now became the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America.

Dr. Stub had led his followers into a truly unionistic document, inasmuch as it gave both sides in the controversy on conversion and election, an opportunity to say "that is what we teach." Certain sentences in this document assert that the eternal decree of election unto faith and everlasting life is a cause of our salvation. Other sentences convey the doctrine that God has chosen certain men to be finally saved because He foresaw that

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.195



they would accept the Gospel and remain steadfast in faith. Thesis I states that both sides unreservedly accept the doctrine in both forms, and thesis II declares that no new thesis on the doctrine of election are required. Thesis IV speaks of man's "feeling of responsibility over against acceptance or rejection of grace;" man has no power to accept grace but only to reject it.

The Synodical Conference Report of 1912 sums up the contents of the "Madison Agreement" well with the following words:

Only the first form represents the truth of the Scripture and of the Confessions while the second form is not found in God's Word and the Confessional writings of the Lutheran Church, and hence is not entitled to such recognition in the church.

Bacon's Essay on "Unity in Religion" written in 1615, has words that apply to this church union: "There are two false peaces, or unities; the one, when the peace is grounded but upon an implicit ignorance; the other, when it is pieced up upon a direct admission of contraries in fundamental points.\*"

The Synodical Conference had objected to the formation of the Norwegian Lutheran Church on grounds that it was a union without true unity because of its stand on election. When the Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo Synods found it possible to reach doctrinal agreement with the Norwegian Lutherans, the Missouri Synod questioned whether the "Chicago Thesis" were adequate. When the Missouri Synod's committee presented the "Chicago Thesis" to the 1926 convention, the committee itself questioned the adequacy of the thesis. Some of those who were pushing the "Chicago Thesis" now found it possible to talk "union" with the Norwegians. Missouri now really doubted the strength of the election article of the thesis. The meeting that concerned Missouri took place at Minneapolis, Minnesota in November, 1925. At this meeting, Ohio, Buffalo, and the Norwegians adopted the "Minneapolis Thesis."

Point VI of the document declared that they regarded the synods accepting the document to be one in doctrine and practice, that the participating

<sup>8</sup> Synodical Conference Report of 1912, p. 24.

\* Theodore Graebner. The Problem of Lutheran Union. St. Louis: C. P. H., 1935, p. 79

synods ought to recognize each other as truly Lutheran, and that they should enter upon pulpit and altar fellowship. This claim was thus also being made by those who had agreed to the "Madison Agreement" in 1917, with its two forms and beliefs on election.

By 1929, the synods involved in the "Minneapolis Thesis" had accepted the thesis and entered into fellowship relations. As a result of a number of other colloquies, the Augustana Synod, the United Danish Ev. Lutheran Church, and the Lutheran Free Church accepted the thesis formed at Minneapolis, and they were accepted into the growing circle of fellowship. In a series of meetings between those synods, plans were laid to organize a new federation in 1930 known as the American Lutheran Conference.

The "Minneapolis Thesis," however, was only a final step in transmitting the failures of Dr. Stub and making them evident. Stub had held the highest position in his church and could have stood firmly on the doctrine of election taught in Scripture, even if it had meant giving up the union effort. But this was not the course that he chose. Missouri looked back at his actions and the results as they developed at Minneapolis, and rightly decided to reject the "Chicago Thesis," especially in view of the article on election. Stub's actions in the end revealed that something was lacking in the article, or at least that it had no strength to influence those claiming to be bound to it. In the events of church history that took place, Missouri's committee acted properly when it reported in 1929: "Your Committee finds itself compelled to advise Synod to reject these thesis."

Missouri was ridiculed and harassed because of their actions. Dr. Abrahamson, editor of "Augustana," said: "We

We regard the oft repeated judgments of the Missourians over the other Lutheran synods in this country as uncalled for and uncharitable. Missouri should not continue its

exclusivism with reference to other Lutheran synods because it does not agree with the spirit of Christ and the command of love.<sup>9</sup>

Similar reports appeared in "Lutheran Church Review," "The Kirchenblatt" and others. Yet, in view of Dr. Stub, the "Madison Agreement," and the "Minneapolis Thesis," for Missouri, in the interest of true Lutheranism, there was no other possibility.

---

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Graebner, The Problem of Lutheran Union. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1925, p.112.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1) Graebner, Theodore. The Problem of Lutheran Union. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1935.
- 2) Lueker, Erwin. Luthern Cyclopedia. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954.
- 3) Nelson. The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian Americans. Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960.
- 4) Nelson. Lutheranism In North America(1914-1970). Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972.
- 5) Proceedings of the Thirty-Fourth Regular Convention, Ev. Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States. 1929.
- 6) Synodical Conference Report, 1912, p.24.
- 7) Theologische Quartalshrift, "Chicago Thesis." Vol.26, 1929, p.250f
- 8) Tietjen. Which Way To Lutheran Unity? St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966.
- 9) Wentz. Lutheranism In America. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964.
- 10) Wentz, Frederick K. Lutherans In Concert. Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968.
- 11) Wolf, B.C. Documents of Church Unity in America. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966.