

Hindsight of the Protestant Controversy-Avoidable or Unavoidable?

Church History

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The only way to correctly evaluate the controversy is to briefly deal with the individual cases that led to the rift. It was precipitated by a series of events and not by only a single issue..

The Watertown Incident: 1924-1925 In 1924,, 27 boys were found guilty of stealing.. Seven were expelled indefinitely by the faculty.. Because of bad weather the parents weren't properly notified before the expulsions.. Rumors regarding third degree methods of obtaining the confessions were also spread.. Thus, lack of proper lines of communication between faculty and parents of suspended boys resulted in some parents asking the college board to look into the matter. They hadn't exercised their right in 17 years, but the suspensions could be overridden by them. The faculty was then asked to meet with the board regarding the suspensions.

Rumors had spread during the Joint Synod Convention of October 1924 that the "highhanded" synod board was about to give the faculty a raw deal.. A number of pastors in the area then attended one such meeting. These pastors eventually became the Protes'tents, though they claimed that many hardly knew each other at that time. They tried to defend the faculty's action over against the board,, but were often ruled out of order. This made them highly incensed. Prof. Pieper was present at these meetings in some official capacity and repeatedly cut off the Pastor's objections. This action of his was remembered by the Protes'tants and helped them to more

readily object to anything he had to say on latter issues. He seemed to be a blunt man, that made no bones about the power his official capacity had.

But the truth of the matter is, was it right for them to stick their noses into that business anyway? Our Prof. Hoenecke, who was a pastor in the area, ^{was} asked by one of his fellow pastors, who eventually became a Protes'tant, to attend with him to check officialdom's dictatorial powers. Prof. Hoenecke said that he was called to take care of his congregation, and that's where his responsibility lay. His implication was, of course, ^{that} that pastor should do the same and mind his own business. This is a key to many of the smaller incidents that led to the eventual rift. The Protes'tants were poking their noses into areas outside of their jurisdiction and just concern. All the cases might not have blown up in the proportions they did had they not been so interested in knocking down what they considered high-handed officialdom actions. This is not to say "officialdom" was lilly white. Their actions, too, often left something to be desired at this time.

As a result of the board's meetings, the faculty's decision regarding the suspensions was cast aside and less stern punishments were to be decided upon by the faculty. This appalled the faculty which felt it's discipline would be undermined. The Protes'tant reaction is recorded by

Paul Hensel.

"I recall that the assembly was frightened when the thing happened, and someone remarked that this was the first rift, that meant the ultimate bursting asunder of Synod." 1

Two members of the faculty, Prof. Karl Koehler and Prof. Herbert Parisius, submitted their resignations. They told their colleagues that they would be willing to remain teaching for no salary until the end of the year. The faculty agreed and was grateful ~~of~~ ^{for} the two men's offers. But when members of the board heard about it, they highly objected. They told the two that they should immediately stop teaching. They also asked the faculty where they got the idea that they had the right to hire and fire personnel. A committee of the board then tried to deal with the two professors in the hope that they might withdraw their resignations. But this was to no avail because there was too much animosity on both sides, especially between certain members of the board and Prof. Karl Koehler, the son of J.P. Koehler, professor at the Seminary. This is important to note at this time as the handling ^{of} ~~of~~ his son might have been a factor later on that was not to be forgotten by father J.P. Koehler.

One can not condemn the Protes'tant's wonderment at this action. One can still ask the question, again, that echoes Prof. Hoenecke's feeling about the incident, was it their business? They didn't feel it their place yet, though, to jump into the middle of the action and start the fracas,

as is shown by Pastor M.A. Zimmerman's remarks.

"Altho I did not then and do not even today agree with the action of the faculty in suspending the guilty students, yet the entire action of the board from the very beginning of its dealing with the faculty until the very end lacked true brotherliness and gave evidence of the spirit that smacks of tyranny. Altho I inwardly condemned the high-handed action of the board and admired those professors, who resigned their professorship rather than sacrifice their honest convictions, yet I registered no protest, but with serious misgivings watched the fray from the sidelines." 2

The Ruediger Incident: 1925-1926 Prof. Ruediger of the Seminary had been accused of making propaganda in the Watertown case, of being a busy-body in other men's affairs, and of creating confusion. The Protestants claimed that they did not see the justice of these serious accusations, yet Prof. Ruediger felt compelled to give a confession of sins. He did admit that he introduced controversial material into his class lectures and agitated against Synod. It was printed and sent to every minister in the Synod. The Protestants asked themselves, why? Had Ruediger sinned against every minister in synod? Pastor Zimmerman remarked when he received his letter:

"I could only see in the publication of Ruediger's confession, in which he lays bare his soul, a self-justifying spirit of his opponents. Surely, Our Savior has not taught us to deal thus with a confessing soul." 3

Note well in Zimmerman's last sentence the underlying feeling that shows itself later in further incidents, that officialdom lacked the gospel forgiving approach to things, but rather operated from a law platform. This became more

evident in Beitz's paper that was supported by the Protés'tants and could maybe explain their acceptance of Beitz's heresy - repentance lies at the foot of the cross and not in the law.

Prof. Ruediger's continued presence at the Seminary became unbearable, and he was suspended. M. Zimmerman's remarks are again called upon, as his view seems to be the opinion felt by those Pastors about to be Protes'tants. It should be noted that they still showed restraint at this time, though highly iritated.

"Again I did not register a protest, but remained silent and like all others in synod tried to excuse my silence before my God with the conscience-anesthetic; I'm not well enough informed. Again the authority of the boards and officials was established. In the Watertown case as also in the Ruediger case the question was not; How much Christian love and consideration can we show? How lenient, how merciful can we be? But, how far can we exert our power, our authority? And mark well the inconsistency: The sinning students, although suspended, were reinstated; and the sinning Brother Ruediger, although, penitent, was suspended."

It's too bad Pastor Zimmerman and the other Protes'tants didn't stick with their "Conscience-anesthetic", that they weren't well enough informed. It appears that Ruediger's suspension might have been uncalled for. It is true, though, that dissension on a faculty can wreck untold havoc, especially if the views are shared by some of the students, who then would lean toward certain professors and create further disruptions. But I will agree with Zimmerman and say that leniency certainly was not the watchword at that time nor in the up-coming incidents. He does, though, unjustly judge

peoples' hearts by making the statement that the action was just a show of power and authority.

We can see from these two incidents, Watertown and Prof. Ruediger's, that there were men who were, sometimes not always silently, seething and were, to be sure, progressively building in their animosity towards officialdom in any form - be it the Watertown College board, or the Seminary board or the West Wisconsin District or the top synod officials themselves.

The Fort Atkinson Incident: 1926-1927. Two young lady teachers, Miss Gerda Koch and Miss Elizabeth Reuter, of St. Paul's School, Fort Atkinson criticized the pastor and the congregation openly and in such an outspoken manner that they were disciplined by the church council and not permitted to teach any longer at the school. Most of the girl's objections seem to have been adiaphora and the girls were highly legalistic (bobbed hair a sin). The sins they accused St. Paul's of also was an indictment against other congregations in the district. It isn't necessary to relate all their sins to establish guilt. Their guilt was admitted even by most of the Protestants with the exception of Pastor O. Hensel, who had agreed to make them part of his faculty in Marshfield, and Prof. Ruediger, who was still on the Seminary faculty at that time. But the point to note here is, that the group, not yet clearly identifiable or called the Protestants, was primarily concerned with the manner in which the case was conducted by a synod committee,

and whether the officials had done the proper thing in publishing the suspension of these two teachers. Leigh D. Jordahl records the Protes'tant side and feeling at that time.

"Both women were Wisconsin Synod products, totally educated within its system and had taught exclusively in Synod schools. The Synod which produced these women must be in some sense responsible for what happened. (That is an uncalled for and unjustifiable judgement. I suppose Jordahl would say that the fact that there are good Synod educated teachers means that they did it despite the Synod. Are we to say then that Jesus was responsible for Judas' going bad? He expresses the Protes'tants' view that showed their animosity against officialdom). Nor had the women been dealt with sensitively and a concern to help them. (Mt. 18 had been abused, they claimed.) The Synod officials and the Fort Atkinson Pastor, it was claimed, had been preoccupied with forcing a retraction out of them. Furthermore, J.P.Koehler's opinion expressed later was that the charges against the women by the local pastor had been on the same level as the charges against him. At the meeting of the West Wisconsin District in June, 1926, the women were suspended from synodical membership. A number of pastors concerned about the way in which the entire issue had been handled wrote what became known as the Beaver Dam Protest. Fifteen men signed this protest, many of whom had also attended the Watertown Transcript Meeting. The men declared that 'our position regarding the entire Fort Atkinson case is this, that we regard it as only one one part of a larger question.' (Prof. E.Kiesling states in History of West Wisconsin District that the larger question can be summed up in one word- "officialdom" 5). The West Wisconsin District empowered its officials to deal conclusively with the signers." 6

This was pushed in part by Prof. August Pieper,

"... who would from this time on take an unusually prominent part in the controversy. He had advised conciliation and mutual understanding in the Watertown case, but his patience had worn thin, and his attitude toward the "Protesler", as he called them, became aggressive. They charged that the paper he read at this convention: "God's Judgment of Wrath", set the mood for what they

considered the unjust action of the District. They also appropriated the name he had given them, translating it "Protes'tants". 7

"When the first two Protes'tants were suspended it was stated specifically that this was because they stubbornly maintained their protest against the synodical conclusion of the case." 8

The Beitz Paper and Gutachten: 1926-1927 The rift

might have been healed and the storm blown over had it not been for a conference paper written by Pastor William Beitz. It was titled "God's Message to Us in Galations: The Just Shall Live by Faith". It was first read at the Wisconsin River Valley conference at Schofield in September, 1926, and a second time at the mixed conference at Rusk in October. The Protes'tants hailed this paper as a statement of their dissatisfaction with officialdom. Those not in the Protes'tant group on the other hand thought it was slanderous and contained false doctrine. It had been widely distributed by the time it was read a third time the next spring at the conference in Marshfield in the presence of District officials. Because the entire situation was a volatile one, Pres. Thurow announced that he didn't want to pass judgment on it until he had the Seminary faculty deliver a critique of it.

Three members of the faculty, A. Pieper, J. Meyer and W. Henkel, prepared a Gutachten or critique of the Beitz paper. As it turned out, Prof. Pieper was highly involved with the entire issue and thus it became mostly his paper, though it was signed by all his colleagues including J. Koehler. Koehler

told the faculty not to release the paper until he had first talked to Beitz. He felt that he might mean something different than what his paper conveyed. The Gutachten was released without Koehler's knowledge and Beitz had it in his possession when he went to talk to him. After Koehler talked to Beitz he wanted to send a letter to all the pastors in synod telling them that he wanted his signature removed from the Gutachten. But he was reprimanded by his colleagues and told not to do so. He stated that he had a different conception from his colleagues as to what Beitz actually wanted to say. This endeared Koehler to the Protestants while alienating him against the other side, especially his own colleagues.

Briefly the contents of the Gutachten can be pointed out by giving the summary that the writers of the Gutachten give in conclusion to their paper:

1. "That he twists a justification text into a preaching of sanctification, as a result of which he mixes and intermingles justification and sanctification throughout his essay and perverts the way unto life.
2. That on the basis of his erroneous conception of the Epistle to the Galatians, he condemns the majority of hearers and teachers among us as people living in the dead works of the Law and that he describes the Lutheran Church, the Synodical Conference, and especially our synod as ripe for the judgment of God, because of their legalism.
3. That his teaching of repentance is fanatical and Antinomian, beclouding the way to peace and everlasting life for Christians and non-Christians.
4. That he fanatically condemns the teaching methods cultivated among us, particularly the Catechism instruction, dogmatics, and homiletics, as leading to spiritual death and recommends fanatical teaching methods of his own.

5. Finally, the author of this essay must be given corrective instruction not only concerning insufferable heresies, but must also be admonished concerning his horrible judgment of hearts and the ghastly public slander of his brethren in office and the teachers. Concerning both of these duties, we entreat those especially called thereunto, to act with unstinted love, but with uncompromising earnestness according to the directives laid down in the Word of God, so that peace among the brethren and unity of doctrine be restored."

If one were to read Beitz's document and then the Gutachten following it, he would come to the conclusion that Beitz was to be fully condemned. Beitz's paper was in a biting and non-evangelical tone. The Gutachten used strong language, too, but not in the high and mighty slanderous tone of Beitz's paper. It pointed out his fallacies quite well.

But obviously the Protestants didn't think so. They didn't think the paper presented any new doctrine, but rather they looked upon it as a call to repentance, by the Synod of past dictatorial actions. The other side looked upon it as heresy and the Gutachten as a confessional document. The Protestants claim that at the West Wisconsin District convention in November, 1927, Beitz was given very little time to explain his paper. Most of the time was spent in reading and reiterating the Gutachten. Pieper ridiculed Beitz on the Beitz paper to stop the spread of this heresy before it was publicly known to the congregations concerning the dissension within synod and Beitz's criticisms. The Protestants rightly felt there was not enough time taken in letting all the voters go through point by point each of the papers and let Beitz explain

exactly what he meant. The issue was brought to a quick vote.

Jordahl explains the events:

"In a single motion the body accepted the Gutachten and and declared the Beitz paper as heresy.. All those who subscribed to the Beitz paper were to be regarded as "those who have separated themselves from us". It should be notedth the double motion meant that in accepting the Gutachten, even its objective doctrine, not really a point of controversy since there is no evidence of any genuine doctrinal controversy in the entire issue, one was automatically condemning Beitz. This is significant in view of the fact that some of the suspended Protes'tants never were happy with the wording of the Beitz paper, but defended it over against the Gutachten, also, in most cases, as a timely and necessary repentance, preachment." 10

The synod looks black when the foregoing are looked at, but the Protestants disregard the fact that Beitz refused to change a single work of his paper. Also a committee of twelve was appointed to deal with each Protes'tant and if possible to put off their severing fellowship with the synod. Each Protes'tant was to present his objections in writing.

Their answers was the "Elroy Declaration" signed by thirteen pastors and sixteen laymen. They refused to appear before any committee either of the synod or District because, as Prof. Kiesling summerizes it,

1. It would do no good and be merely a waste of time.
2. The committee had the pertinent information or could easily get it.
3. The District at its Beaver Dam and Watertown conventions had been guilty of "unheard of godlessness",
4. They would stand completely on the Beitz paper over against the synod.
5. They would only deal with the synod if the resolutions of Beaver Dam and Watertown would be rescinded, all cases open as new cases and Synod would show a new attitude, which might give hope of profitable dealings." 11

That declaration practically made the rift impossible to be healed.

Prof. Kiesling gives good proof of his opinion of the whole matter:

"When the Synod in 1961 asked the Western Wisconsin District of its own free will and accord to reconsider the suspensions, it not only reconsidered but removed them for the following reasons: The resolutions were clouded over with uncertainties; their scope was in doubt; the resolutions were not unanimous; interpretations put on the resolutions were unclear and various. All these reasons existed at the time of the suspensions. Looking back with the gift of hindsight, one is tempted to say that they should never have been issued. Undoubtedly there was a tendency to overreact in the heat of the controversy. This is not to argue, however, that the dissidents were ousted by a monstrous misuse of power. An unfortunate expression attributed to Prof. Pieper, shape up or be shipped out, was widely quoted to bolster such a view. In reality, the members of the third party had themselves assumed a defiant, dismissive stance long before there was any threat of suspensions. They had also made no secret of their conviction that Synod was under the judgment of God and in a state of obduracy." 12

I agree that passion and anger instead of logic and Christian love were lacking by both sides, but I do believe the Protestants were rightly suspended. Maybe they shouldn't have been suspended as quickly as they were, but they were rightly suspended because there was heresy in Beitz's paper. Those men had time to look over Beitz's paper and discover the false doctrine in the midst of their own views of judging others as not being up to par in many areas.

Their false doctrine is shown by the Beitz paper and Paul Hensel's "Wauwatosa Theology, Which is it?". This paper was a reply to the Gutachten and a defense of Beitz's paper.

I will show the heresy both had in only one instance. There are many other sections, but this one example will suffice to show their common heresy concerning repentance.

Hensel's paper brings out a point in their favor that can't be overlooked. The judging of hearts, overstress of dogmatics, too much law and not enough gospel and some others were points brought forth previously by Prof. Pieper himself in an essay he read on the synod floor in 1919 and in various Quartalschrift articles that he wrote. Beitz merely echoed much of what Pieper had said. The place where Beitz, Hensel, and the Protestants went too far on was Pieper's point that there had to be gospel motivation. They interpreted that as meaning that the law should be dropped in trying to make people repent. It's not hard to see that Pieper could be misinterpreted but he does make the clear distinction between law and gospel, whereas Beitz and Hensel don't. Pieper stated in the Quartalschrift, Oct. 1910, p. 284, as is quoted by Hensel:

"Always, always is their preaching of repentance oriented in the Gospel. Their preaching of repentance is reproof and at the same time the coaxing call of the cluck, Law and Gospel conjoint. 'Return thou backsliding Israel, etc... Only acknowledge thine iniquity,' etc. Jeremiah 3:12,13. 'Repent and believe the Gospel.' 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,' is the corresponding message of the New Testament. Never and nowhere dare we forget that it is the Gospel, preached upon the preparatory mission of the mission of the Law, which achieves a change of heart." 13

Hensel says that Beitz wishes to say the very same thing:

This is why he entitles his paper, "Wauwatosa Theology, Which is it?". He thought Beitz said the same as Pieper did, and now Pieper said Beitz was wrong. Hensel asks then, which way is it supposed to be? What is the approach to repentance then? Isn't one to point out the errors of people and ask then to report? Pieper did it and it was right. Beitz did the same and was wrong. Which is it? Beitz wrote what he felt was the same as what Pieper wrote:

"It is that mercy, that love behind the law, that Christ, not the commandments apart from that mercy, that caused the Pentecost audience to be pricked in their hearts saying: 'Men and brethren what must we do?'" 14

But in checking Acts 2 especially verses 34-38 it is the law that pricks their hearts not the gospel. Peter told his audience that they killed the son of God that David prophesied of in his Psalms. It's true Peter speaks of Christ, but he points the law at them when he tells them "Jesus, who you have crucified." The apostle makes a clear distinction between law and gospel that Beitz and Hensel do not. The law is necessary for repentance and this Beitz and Hensel discard. Note Hensel's words:

"What Prof. Pieper expressed above in the Quartalschrift is what we mean and what we say. The proper preaching of repentance rebukes and coaxes at the same, time. Only love can coax. Therefore every preaching of the Law and of repentance is at the same time an expression of love. (False. The Law condemns and shows us that the consequence of sin is hell. God wants to send the sinner to hell. Psalm 5:4 "Thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness." The rest of the paragraph shows more clearly his error.) We simply have to do with paradoxes. Logical differentiation and sharp sequencing does not make for clarity. Faith brings clarity. Faith brings logic, too... Because of our mania for making a formal distinction between the two Law and Gospel, and cutting

all the issues with which they have grown together, and placing them neatly in order- because of this mania we were about to proclaim two Gods, the God of Sinai and the God of Golgatha. Rather we came near painting God as two-faced. God had one face. It has been manifested in Christ Jesus." 15

The proper distinction between law and Gospel is mind bending at times. God hates the sinner. God loves the sinner. Hensel is right that both are a paradox but both have to stand. Both are reconciled in the cross of Christ. The law is a necessity to bring one to repentance.

There will be no attempt made to show his mixing justification and sanctification. Pieper charged that Beitz was judging people's hearts by making the charge that most of the members of synod were not believers because of their sinful activities in their life. Beitz defended himself by saying that he was not saying all were unbelievers, and he was not judging hearts. Since he interpreted his statements ^{in this manner} and perhaps this charge of the Gutachten could be dropped. But no interpretation of Beitz's heresy on repentance by himself in later articles of Faith-Life or by Hensel's paper, acquitted him.

Pieper made it hard for the Protés'tants to see the heresy as he pointed it out because of Beitz's echoing Pieper's former writings on many points and his outbursts of anger and power. A Protés'tant must have asked himself, how can Pieper condemn the man when he himself said the same thing about the spiritual laxness and deadness in our synod?

One can also perhaps see why this heresy might have

developed. P. Hensel said that he and so many of the students at the Seminary grew weary of the continuous law preaching at the Seminary and at the churches in Wauwatosa. ^{May} be those pastors around there were heavy on the law, too, because they knew the Seminary stressed it. Anyway, Hensel, Beitz, and the rest of the Protestants might have justly seen the error in this. But in wanting to hear the sweet breeze of the gospel and wanting to preach that which they seldom heard, they might have thereby unknowingly gone too far and decided to rid themselves of law in preaching repentance. (It is ironic, though, that Beitz's, Hensel's, and the rest of the Protestant writers in Faith-Life issues in wanting synod to repent only preached the law and not the gospel.) But this last paragraph is conjecture on my part rather than factual evidence.

None of this is ~~not~~ to excuse them, though. J. Meyer wrote a very evangelical review of Beitz's paper in the Quartalschrift in English in Vol. 25, 1925, pp. 135ff. that should not have irritated the Protestants as did the tone of the Gutachten. It was to be distributed free of charge to those churches that requested light on the subject as the copies to the Gutachten ran out. It was written ^{so} so a layman could understand it. In there he clearly points out the heresy. Besides, these men should have been continuing to study the Lutheran Confessions and their Bibles to discern between truth and untruth. That was their job. From the Elroy Declaration they make it clear that they supported

Beitz's heresy. Heresy is what draws lines between personal likes and dislikes. Sure, synod might have bungled an awful lot in not deciding the cases and incidents rightly or was too quick in their judgments and suspensions. But the synod wasn't preaching false doctrine.

Avoidable or unavoidable? If the synod had been slower in those days and less power hungry, and both could have quietly sat down and clear mindedly discussed the heresy in Beitz's paper, the rift might not have been with so many, been so deep and not lasted so long. The quick actions by both sides and the Protestants' hatred of synod officials don't might have resulted in the Protestants not being able to discern between the good and evil. But this by no means excuses them. They were supporting heresy and the synod has the God-given responsibility to get rid of the cancer before it spreads. If it means that there are some that are going to protest this action and disagree because they don't consider it heresy, then it's not synod's fault. The opposition is in the wrong and accountable to God. Where one side holds to heresy and refuses to conform to scriptures, the controversy then becomes unavoidable.

Footnotes

- 1 Hensel. Faith Life, "Why I am a Protes'tant."
- 2 Zimmerman.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Kiesling. p.19.
- 6 Jordahl.
- 7 Kiesling. p.20.
- 8 Jordahl.
- 9 Seminary Faculty.
- 10 Jordahl.
- 11 Kiesling. p.24.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Hensel. Faith Life, "Wauwatosa Theology, Which is it?", p.16.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.

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