



Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church - Hokah, MN.

"CHURCHIANITY IS NOT CHRISTIANITY"

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Second Quarter Paper
March 21, 1973

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
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"Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, nay; but rather division: for from henceforth there shall be five in one house divided, three against two and two against three" (Luke 12:51-52). When Jesus spoke these words, he was looking ahead in time through the ages to the many divisions that would occur in the visible church from century to century. Divisions which would be made because Christ was being despised by some men while others were giving Him His rightful place in their lives. The reason why Christ was being despised may vary according to the various incidents, but the underlying motive was always that Christ was not receiving the glory and honor due His name.

Most often we think of divisions in church related matters as occurring only among the larger bodies and organizations. When synods split or church bodies sever fellowship this always receives the greatest attention and publicity. But there are also divisions which take place on a smaller scale. Remember what Jesus said, "There shall be five in one house divided, three against two, and two against three." Divisions can also take place in small numbers, in quiet surroundings, in unknown places. Such is the subject matter of this paper.

The case history of the congregation to be named is not unique. Many congregations, while experiencing growing pains in their early years of existence succumbed to the same course of events as Zion Evangelical Lutheran

Church of Hokah, Minnesota. The number of similar cases might indeed be astounding within our own synod, to say nothing of the remainder of Christendom. Even within a distance of 8 miles, an identical situation took place only a few years before the problem arose in the congregation at Hokah. Perhaps a person might even point to this earlier case as being a catalyst for events in Hokah. In both instances though, the few that remained, although bereft of church building and property, maintained this principle: CHURCHIANITY IS NOT CHRISTIANITY.

Situated in the foothills of the Mississippi River basin, along the winding Root River is Hokah, Minnesota. The population today is only about 400. At one time Hokah boasted of a population of over 1300. This was during the days of the railroad boom when the railroad set up its shops in Hokah. Today it serves the area as a retirement community for the local farmers and in recent years as a suburbia type community for the larger, industrial oriented city of La Crosse, Wisconsin.

Like many small towns of the Midwest, Hokah was founded in the mid 1800's. Edward and Clark Thompson were two brothers from Illinois who were looking for a mill site. The official founding date was March 27, 1855. Edward Thompson was a leading figure in the affairs of the village as well as the county and held many public offices both by election and appointment.

It is ^{not} surprising to learn that the first religious work in the Hokah area was carried on by the Methodist. The horseback missionary was indeed the first to arrive

and begin work among the scattered settlers. This work by the Methodist was going on two years before the town itself was founded. Almost instantaneous with the founding of the settlement, the Roman Catholics began to serve their people in the vicinity. Today the Catholic church is by far the largest in Hokah and supports a parochial school also. Until the early 1960's, they also equipped their own Catholic High School, but decline in enrollment and higher educational costs forced the high school department to close.

The Lutheran church did not appear in Hokah until the late 1860's. This does not mean to say that Lutherans were not in the area. In 1862 a Lutheran congregation had been founded in Brownsville by the Rev. G. Fachtmann, who was pastor at that time of First Lutheran congregation in La Crosse. Brownsville was at this time a flourishing river town only 8 miles distant from Hokah, vieing with La Crosse in population size and river traffic. Perhaps as we look back in time and view the personnel who were instrumental in founding the congregations in this area, we can see a weakness which seems to be common to the congregations.

Pastor Fachtmann was expelled from the Minnesota synod for unionistic tendencies. Whether this charge was justifiable or not, I shall leave up to the research of Carl Zimmer in connection with his paper on the church in New London, Wisconsin. If correct however, this tendency would seem to indicate a laxity in church discipline in

connection with liberal leaning churches and organizations which are not in full agreement with God's Word. This statement however can not be definitely proved, and must be so stated. But the fact remains that the congregation in Brownsville, an effort of Fachtmann, First Lutheran congregation of La Crosse, a church under the care of Fachtmann, and Zion congregation of Hokah, a daughter mission of Brownsville all experienced congregational struggles in connection with the question of secret societies. In fact this was a burning issue in First Lutheran congregation throughout the 20's, 30's and even into the 40's. This may be reading too much into the situation, but it is a thought to consider.

After several years of being served only as a preaching station by Pastor Reitz of Brownsville, the Lutherans in Hokah organized into a congregation on October 7, 1872.¹ Pastor Ed. Werner of Union Township² now served the congregation since Pastor Reitz's health did not permit him to continue with the added load. The following years saw a constant change in pastors. In 1874 Pastor Ed. Werner was called to another parish and the pastor from Brownsville was once again prevailed upon to administer to the flock in Hokah. Pastor John Jahn served the members of Hokah for the next 5 years, but then because of ill health resigned from the ministry.

1. In the Geschichte der Minnesota-Synode the name of the congregation is referred to as St. Pauls. I believe this is a printing mistake. It should be Zion.

2. Union Township is about 9 miles southwest of Hokah.

Again the pastor from Union Township, Pastor J. Kopelke took charge of the congregation, but only for a period of two years. In 1880 Pastor C. Gutknecht served the Hokah parish but remained only until 1883 when Pastor J. Volkert filled in. In 1887, due to ill health, Pastor Volkert was forced into retirement. While the Hokah congregation was experiencing a vacancy, Pastor W.P. Haar Sr. was sent by the Minnesota Synod to oversee the vacancy.

It was during this time that rumblings began to appear upon the horizon in the Hokah church. Many times this same thing has happened, that during a vacancy, the congregation experiences problems, and has no curate of souls to straighten out the situation according to the norm of God's Word. Many times the lay people do not know the complete sphere of Christian doctrine and can not see things which are contrary to the Word of God. In these cases it becomes the responsibility of the pastor to instruct them in the truths of God, but if a pastor is not present the thoughts and feeling of the people hold sway.

The outward intentions of the congregation indeed looked good when they held the congregational meeting to call a pastor in 1888. The vote was 17-2 in favor of calling a pastor from the Minnesota Synod. The split vote, even though it was only 2 votes, should have forewarned those present to the dangers lurking in the darkness. Shortly after the congregational meeting a majority of the voting members met in secret to consider calling the Evangelical pastor from the Brownsville congregation.

This majority group of the congregation carried through with its intention and called Pastor Karl Mayer of the Brownsville and Crooked Creek congregations to serve them.

What caused this split to occur within Zion of Hokah? The primary cause was the lodge. Like many other frontier towns in the 1850's and 60's, the secret societies or lodges were an up and coming thing. They were an important part of the social life and atmosphere of the town. They were a symbol of prestige and importance. Hokah had its share of them. In January of 1857 Hokah became Lodge 17 of the Ancient, Free, and Accepted Masons of Minnesota. Originally they were to be Lodge 9, but their delegate did not reach St. Paul until the final day of the Grand Lodge's convention. In February of 1868 a chapter of the Royal Arch Masons was begun. In October of 1869 a lodge of the Ancient Order of United Workmen was begun for those who were not skilled artisans in any trade. In March of 1875 Lake Como Lodge No. 49 of the Odd Fellows recieved the rite to organize and hold meetings. When one combines this strong influence of the lodge with the fact that the pastorate in Hokah was not served by one man over a period of years and at the present time was vacant, it is not surprising that many members of Zion congregation became involved in the lodge to a greater or lesser degree. The prestige and importance played upon by the lodge system is a powerful force to reckon with. The fact of Christianity does not seem so important as does the thought of CHURCH-
IANITY and lodge membership.

Another very important thing to consider is the position of the two church bodies involved in the picture: the Evangelical Synod of North America (also known as the German Evangelical Synod of North America), and the Minnesota Synod in 1888.

The Evangelical Synod of North America is a direct descendant of the Prussian Union of King Frederick William III of Prussia in 1817. The unification of the Lutheran and Reformed banners under one flag was met with mixed emotions. Many accepted the merger, while others fought against it and left the country to escape its unionistic tendency. Many of the Evangelicals, as the unionist were called, came to the area around Missouri and set up their Lutheran-Reformed churches, schools and seminaries.. Perhaps the following doctrinal statement would describe the majority of the Evangelicals and their doctrinal stand.

The German Evangelical Church Association of the West, as part of the Evangelical church, defines the term Evangelical Church as denoting that branch of the Christian Church which acknowledges the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God, the sole and infallible guide of faith and life, and accepts the interpretations of the Holy Scriptures as given in the symbolical books of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches, the most important being the Augsburg Confession, Luther and Heidelberg Catechisms, in so far as they agree; but where they disagree, the German Evangelical Association of the West adheres strictly to the passages of Holy Scripture bearing on the subject and avails the liberty of conscience prevailing in the Evangelical Church.³

3. The Religious Bodies of America, F. E. Mayer, page 368.

This statement leaves the field wide open. The individual pastor can pretty well say what he wants to believe and doesn't want to believe. The Evangelicals as a whole did not condemn the lodge nor did they take any action against those who wished to be members of the lodge. Is it no wonder then that these men on Hokah sought a pastor from the ranks of the Evangelicals and not the Minnesota Synod. They were looking for a man who agreed with them and not with what the Word of God says.

The Minnesota Synod on the other hand, was becoming stricter in its adherence to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530. We know that as early as 1879 the Minnesota Synod, a comparable liberal when set next to the Wisconsin Synod, was drawing up plans for an external union with the Wisconsin Synod. There was no doubt that these synods took a united stand against the lodges and all affiliated groups. Thus calling a man from the Minnesota Synod would have meant confronting the lodge problem head on. This was neatly avoided by the majority in Zion congregation.

There are a few other problems which also need a critical inspection. Why, in the regular congregational meeting did the vote stand 17-2 in favor of calling a man from Minnesota, but then shortly after that, the majority of the membership called from the Evangelical Synod, the man at Brownsville to handle the affairs in Hokah? Was it because the prospect of receiving a man from Minnesota was remote while the Evangelical man at Brownsville was

only 8 miles distant? This answer would seem too simple. I believe the answer is rather this, although once again proof is lacking. In the regular congregational meeting of Zion congregation, a pastor was present to conduct the call meeting, as is customary today also. Perhaps the pastor was Pastor Haar Sr. who was the vacancy pastor. The majority not wanting to show their true colors and face the possibility of congregational reprimand or even expulsion for their lodge membership, voted with the minority who indeed wanted true Lutheranism in the person of a pastor from the Minnesota Synod. Once the pastor was no longer present, these men met again in secret to call the man who would agree with them and their type of Christianity, namely CHURCHIANITY.

Another problem which some have raised, but really is not a problem, is this. Why were some of these men opposed to the lodge in the first place? Some people in Hokah, even to this day, say that these few men who 'rebelled' against the majority and left the original Zion congregation were fearful of secret societies. They objected to the societies not because of doctrinal and religious issues but because of the nature of the lodge and its secretive organization. While it can not be denied that many people throughout the country feared the rising power of the secret organizations and the possibility that they might some day take over the country, it would seem highly unlikely that men would suffer hardship and extremely unfavorable conditions to remain together

as a functioning church body. The ten members who separated themselves from the majority were not worried about the secret societies and their possible power take over. They were worried about the Gospel of Christ and its rightful place in the lives of men. They recognized that the lodge and Christ could not stand side by side. One had to go. Christ could not be set aside. They fought for purity of teaching and practise in their midst. They indeed had it, but paid a dear price for it. In retrospect we can only thank God that He gave these men the courage to fight for their Savior and His rightful position as Lord and King of all things.

Although I do not intend to treat the evils of the lodge and show its unchristian nature, I do think it would be proper to point out several areas where their unchristian religious aspects appear and how they contradict the clear Words of Scripture.

1. They require oaths to be taken in things that are uncertain. God tells us not to swear by heaven or earth or anything. The one exception is in the courts of law, where the welfare of our fellowman is at stake.
2. They deny the Trinity, especially the person of Christ.
3. They speak of the universal fatherhood of God. All men are supposedly the children of God, both the wicked and the just.
4. They use and address Christless prayers to God.
5. They speak of salvation by works and not by the grace of God.
6. All members of the lodge are sent to heaven, Jew

Christian, and Turk.

7. They ask men of all faiths and creeds to join together in prayer.

These are only a few of the major errors of the lodge in simple unadorned phrases. Whether the faithful few in Hokah realized all these points of contention with God's Word is not important. They did recognize that the lodge was not and can not be a Christian organization by its creeds and practises. They saw that Christianity is something far different than CHURCHIANITY and the lodge.

Several times these two words have appeared in contrast to each other: CHRISTIANITY and CHURCHIANITY. What is the difference between the two? Are they mutually exclusive of each other or is one at times found within the other? These are questions we hope to answer by defining the terms.

Pastor E.G. Hertler of Zion Evangelical Lutheran Congregation in Hokah aptly describes CHURCHIANITY as:

The sin that loves to brag about all the good points in our favor, such as: "All is well with me, because I'm baptized, confirmed partake of communion, sing in the choir, belong to this and/or that society of church, I give liberally, yes, even generously for all the needs of the church. And when I die, I expect to be given a wonderful church funeral. Is that asking too much?" Yes you may have all these credits and still not be a true Christian-yes, you may even be worse than the heathen- whom you despise. 4

This is CHURCHIANITY. It leaves no room for Christ. He is not in the picture, no not even in the corner of the picture.

Christianity on the other hand, places Christ in the center of ones life. The Christian realizes his complete sinfulness and lost condition. He realizes that he is nothing in, of, or by himself. All his power comes from God. He relies solely upon the grace and mercy of God to rescue him from his lost condition. Therefore he is not worried about his image in the congregation or in the community. He does not seek self glory and honor of men, but he seeks ways in which he can honor his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In second place is his consideration of his fellow man and self comes last. That many of the traits CHURCHIANITY should be found in Christianity is expected. The Christian will naturally be baptized, confirmed and partake in congregational activities, but in all these Christ and not self, will be the center of attention. Self is put down while Christ is exalted.

In the congregation in Hokah, the majority were concerned about self. Their image in the community was more important than Christ. They were all baptized, confirmed, and supporters of Zion congregation, but they were doing this for self and not for Christ. Perhaps these remarks seem biting and harsh, but where the Gospel of Christ is degraded to the point where Christ is no longer found in it except by an occasional passing phrase or two, the truth must be spoken. CHURCHIANITY is not Christianity and never will be. It stands in opposition to Christ and His Gospel.

The results of this split in Zion congregation was the

formation of two churches. The majority claimed rights to the church property. They received legal ownership when the 'faithful ten' took legal action and the court decided that the trustee holding the church key should with his followers retain the right to the church property. Today this church is a member of the Evangelical and Reformed Church according to the merger begun in 1934 and fully completed in 1940. The name of the church today reads, The United Church of Christ.

The 'faithful ten' had a hard road to walk for the next several years. They prevailed upon Pastor R. Heidmann of Union Township to conduct services for them in the Presbyterian church in Hokah. Pastor J. Siegler of Caledonia assisted in caring for the souls in Hokah. In 1901 Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church joined with Immanuel Lutheran Church of South Ridge, La Crescent, in a dual parish set up. They were then served by Pastor R. Fehlau for one year and then by Pastor F. Wiechmann until 1916. At this time Pastor E.G. Hertler accepted the call to this dual parish and for the past 57 years has cared for the faithful souls of Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hokah, where Christianity rather than CHURCHIANITY is the guiding rule of teaching and practise.

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