

THE INSPIRATION CONTROVERSY AND ITS EFFECTS

FOR THE NEW ALC, 1930

church history
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May 6, 1972

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
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It may seem ironic that the very thing that has been considered the greatest point of agreement among conservative Lutherans should be the point that causes the most difficulty in the formation of the American Lutheran Church. This difficulty which evolved between the more liberal Iowa Synod and the stricter Ohio Synod nearly resulted in a complete break-off of negotiations and definitely caused a major delay in the merger efforts of the two parties. In this paper will be considered the effect that the inspiration controversy had in determining the doctrine of the new American Lutheran Church as it began in 1930.

From the time of the Reformation there had always been at least a general agreement among conservative German Lutherans. Likewise there had been little differences concerning the inspiration of Scripture between the Ohio and Iowa Synods up until this crucial period in the history of these two church bodies. The Scriptures simply were regarded as revelation, given by God through men. The Bible was considered to be the only rule and standard of faith.

That this was indeed the position to which these two Lutheran churches ascribed is reflected in their earlier writings in their respective constitutions. Both Synods in the eighteenth century and in the early twentieth century attack modern Biblical scholars for radical views on the inerrancy of God's Word.

Whatever inspiration theory German theology may devise in the future, we are convinced that it will be false unless it unmistakably asserts that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are God's Word in the sense that we can so at random reach into them as did the New Testament writers into the Old Testament, and in every case be absolutely certain that we have God's Word before us.

It is tragic however, to observe how such a basic allimportant doctrine for the correct understanding of Scripture is deleted to nothingness through controversy in the hope of unity. On the other hand it is most interesting to see how certain events in this turmoil serve to shape a course for the new ALC.

The road to open disagreement began with the difficulty of coming to terms as to the acceptance of the Word of God in the Intersynodical and the Minneapolis Theses. These statements of belief arose from the Minneapolis Colloquy of 1925 at which time agreement in doctrine was sought between the German Synods and the Norwegian Synod. Considerable debate was held between H. Stub, president of the Norwegian Lutheran Church and C.C. Hein concerning the precise wording of the proposed theses. Much thought was given as to the possibility of using the words "divinely inspired and revealed Word of God" or simply, "inspired and inerrant Word of God." The wording: "the divinely inspired, revealed and inerrant Word of God" was finally accepted. There was, however, a faction which disagreed with such a compromise in the Minnesota Theses. Reu was a proponent of such a faction because he felt that

the statement in the theses was too strong and overlooked certain difficulties in modern versions of the Bible. Thus the foundations for open disagreement were laid: Reu on one side; Hein on the other side.

It wasn't long in 1926 before Reu openly opposed Hein and his "inspired and inerrant" wording. He firmly believed that the Scriptures claimed to be absolutely inerrant only in matters which pertained to faith and Christian life. Because of such deep feelings the Iowa Convention of 1926 proved to be a crucial one. Reu wrote a series of preconvention articles which were definitely polemical in content reverberating the so-called inept dealings of Ohio Synod leaders. Thus the merger, the formation of the American Lutheran Church was in danger.

The Convention of Iowa resulted in that Synod's willingness to merge with Ohio, but only on the basis of changing the wording of the paragraph concerning inspiration. A successful merger was now dependent upon how the Ohio Synod reacted to the conditions laid down by Iowa. Ohio, as it turned out, insisted upon the word "inerrant".

The decision to insist that the word "inerrant" remain where the Joint Commission has placed it, is based simply and solely upon the conviction that the new synod ought and must bear a powerful and unmistakable witness against modernism and the so-called modern positive theology.²

Iowa's position on fellowship also was disturbing to the Ohio Synod. Ohio therefore appealed to Iowa to consider

²Ibid, p.206

the wording "inerrant". Thus Iowa was in a position to work the problem out within its own body. Much controversy resulted including a personal confrontation between Hein and Reu. The matter was also hotly debated among the districts of the Iowa Synod.

It wasn't until the Iowa Convention of 1928 that a series of resolutions were passed which, while they did not rescind the former position, nevertheless were worded carefully enough to gain a favorable response from Ohio. Merger was unanimously voted upon. Later, during a special convention of Iowa in 1929, it was decided by Iowa to endorse a proposal of the inerrancy of the Scriptures much to the pleasure of Ohio as well as the Buffalo Synod which also was included in the merger providing the inerrancy of Scripture was upheld.

The merger conventions of 1930 followed in which a final adoption was approved and so, in August of that year the three synods met to consummate the merger. It should be noted that Reu had not changed his position. For he still had planned to raise some objections, but fearing the turmoil such a statement might cause, he kept silent.

The obvious observation that one can make from this controversy which so endangered the merger of these two church bodies into a formation of the American Lutheran Church is this: these Lutheran Synods never actually reach an agreement on doctrine. It is true, they accomplish a merger on the basis of a so-called agreement. But are they really in harmony with one another? Through

a perponderance of debating over a period of five years, they seem to disguise their real positions with carefully worded resolutions until they thought that an agreement had been achieved. Therefore what is thought to be a merger is really nothing else than a passing over of differences for the prospect of merger. What we have is a pseudo-merger of two church bodies because they willingly sacrifice doctrinal differences for unity...a sign of times to come in the ecumenical movement.

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