

Could The Protestant Controversy Been Avoided? Yes or No.

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When you examine the Protestant Controversy, everything seems to center around three events. Each one alone probably could not have led to a controversy, but when one followed close upon the heels of the other, this was the impetus needed for a walk-out of our Synod by certain contrary men. The idea of this paper is to examine each and see if any of the three incidents could have been avoided, and if it could have, then maybe the whole Protestant Controversy.

The first of these three events is called the "Watertown Case". This marked the beginning of the controversy, although at that time it was <sup>not</sup> recognized as that yet. The Watertown Case happened near the end of March of 1924. A large number of Northwestern students, 10%, were caught stealing. Depending upon the seriousness of the crime, some students were campussed, put on probation, or expelled from school. The trouble arose over the expulsions. All expulsions had to be cleared through the College Board of Control, but in this case they were not. So when it came time for the Board's decision, they overruled the faculty. Naturally the faculty was incensed.

The Board had done this because they said the faculty had overstepped its bounds of authority and according to Synod statutes, the faculty had. The faculty ~~said~~ <sup>had</sup> said this should be not carried through because if it was, the discipline of the school would be destroyed. But the Board stood firm. Immediately Professors Karl Koehler and Herbert Parisius resigned in protest, but offered to continue teaching until the school term was over. The faculty said

it would accept. When the Board heard about it, they said this was rebellion and would have none of it.

A committee of the board then tried to deal with the two professors in hope the matter could be settled and peace could reign in the Synod again. But by now the professors and certain members of the board had gotten too stubborn over the whole matter and said no. Some say Koehler, who had a very low opinion of synodical officials, was the main cause, while later on the Protestants said the dictatorial behavior of Synod officials caused this split. Whoever was the cause, the action of the board in overruling the faculty decision concerning the two professors was the high point of contention between the two groups.

In the meantime the affair had produced repercussions throughout the Synod and a rift formed between those who went along with the board and those who didn't. Some of those who didn't met in the home of Professor Ruediger of the Seminary to consider the case and see if something could be done for the professors who were ousted. About the only thing that happened at the meeting was that they soundly denounced the college board. They said they would never be reconciled with men who had acted in such a damnable way. These actions only served to alienate many who had been sympathetic to them and even many of the faculty whom they had wanted to vindicate. The result of this meeting was the forming of a body within Synod which would eventually become the Protestants.

Who was to blame in this case is really hard to say.

One would most likely say though that the attitude of the dissidents certainly can claim a good share of the blame. Calling Synod officials dictators did nothing to improve relations and was something they could never prove. Yet they would cling to this to the end. Going and talking to their brothers in Christian love seemed to be beneath their dignity. The board, I guess, could come in for its share of the blame too, because it looked like from the facts that they acted in haste without talking it out too. But later they were willing to sit down and talk and the dissidents weren't. They did seem to want to heal any wounds that had been inflicted. And maybe time would have healed all, if not another troublesome matter had arisen. It happened in the same year at Fort Atkinson and started the trouble all over again.

The trouble at Fort Atkinson was the second of the three events and became known as the Fort Atkinson Case. Two young lady teachers, Miss Gerda Koch and Miss Elizabeth Reuter, criticized their congregation, St. Paul's, and accused their pastor, A.F. Nicolaus, of being a false prophet. These two New Ulm teachers were wrong in all their accusations. The pastor tried to tell them that they were objecting to things that were nothing more than adia-phora. He admonished them not to take life so seriously or to judge other people's actions so severely. The teachers said the practises were not adia-phora. If the pastor would not preach against the sins of the congregation in regard to the matters they had spoken to him about, he was nothing more than a false prophet. And if the congregation did not stop, they would be damned sinners.

When the teachers refused to detract any of these statements, the pastor and church council had no choice but to expel them from the classroom and stop their teaching lest they further mislead the children than they already might have. The two teachers informed the director at New Ulm about what was going on in their version, and received calls to Marshfield. Before they were to be permitted to teach there, the principal wanted to know their version of the affair so the church could determine if it was acting correctly in extending the calls. They pleaded their case so successfully that Pastor Hensel was won over. They left to teach at Marshfield just as the church at Fort Atkinson was getting ready to deal with them. The affair had started to come to a head in December of 1924.

St Paul's in Fort Atkinson refused to grant them an honorable dismissal and so informed Pastor Hensel. The teachers asked Pastor Hensel to clear up the case for them. At his suggestion they appealed to the District president. The teachers told him that Pastor Nicolaus and the congregation of St. Paul's had forbidden them to teach and live according to the Word of God and dismissed them because they refused to obey this command. They then protested the filling of their jobs at Fort Atkinson by other teachers.

When the District president, Pastor Thurow, confronted St. Paul's with these charges, they countered with charges of their own. The president arranged meetings, ten in all, but the teachers would never retract anything of their false charges. The president then asked two seminary professors,

J.P. Koehler and G. Ruediger, and a Northwestern professor, H. Schmeling, among others to serve on committees to try and bring about reconciliation. While all the men involved soon came to realize the women were at fault, Professor Ruediger, on the other hand, became their arch supporter. Already in the Watertown Case he had, according to his own confession, introduced controversial material into his class lectures and agitated against the Synod. As a result of his attitude he was censured and eventually dismissed from his post as professor. This happened in January of 1927. The Protestants always maintained that he was ousted because he would not side with the dicatorial powers of Synod.

During all this the teachers were still teaching. St. Paul's became so incensed that they withdrew from the Synod. Finally the Synod Praesidium did rule that the girls were not eligible to teach until this whole case was settled. When the District convention at Beaver Dam in 1926 approved the action of its officials, 15 pastors and two laymen protested. They admitted that the girls had sinned, but objected on the grounds that procedure had not been carried out correctly. Church officials in the District said they had carried out discipline in the manner of Matthew 18. The protesters said this isn't the center really of the controversy but is only a part of a bigger problem. They were harking back again to their charge of dicatorial officials in Synod.

The convention had now had enough of this and passed

a resolution which said that all District presidents by virtue of their election to office had the power to treat conclusively with any protesters. To the dissidents this was a case again of unChristian, popelike power in the hands of Synod officials. President Thurow assured them this wasn't true, but they refused to believe that.

Pastor Hensel in Marshfield continued to object and published pamphlets in which he catalogued supposed sins of the District for, he said, the benefit of his congregation. He made sure they got a wider distribution. The Synod had no choice but to suspend him finally in June of 1927. Nothing Hensel ever said could he back up in fact. On the heels of his suspension came a rash of suspensions over the already overblown controversy. The men who were suspended all came along with the charge of official tyranny.

Who was right and who was wrong in this controversy? The teachers had grievously sinned and that everyone seemed willing to admit. The dispute came over how their case was handled. It seems to me that Synod was more than fair in giving the teachers almost two years to repent before it finally had to act. I would call that Christian love indeed. As said before, the dissenters never could prove any of their charges except to themselves. They seemed to be looking for something to ruin our officials. It seems either out of spite, jealousy, or misdirected fervor for clean politics that they acted this way.

Out of this controversy also they got their name. Professor August Pieper from time to time entered this

controversy. He had advised conciliation and mutual understanding in the Watertown Case, but his patience had worn thin in this one, and his attitude toward the dissenters became aggressive. He called them "The Protestler" and the paper he read at the Beaver Dam convention set the mood for what the dissenters considered the unjust action of the District. They then appropriated the name he had given them by translating Protestler into Protestants.

The third event out of these three which helped to bring about the full-blown Protestant Controversy was known as the "Beitz Paper Controversy". Some people in our Synod still maintain that eventually everything would have returned to normal even after the Fort Atkinson case, if this affair would not have happened. One thing is for sure, that the Beitz paper added fuel to the fire and made the Protestants a lot stronger than they were before.

A young pastor at Rice Lake, Wisconsin named William Beitz, wrote a paper that was hailed by the Protestants as its manifesto of its dissatisfaction with the establishment. It was titled "God's Message to Us in Galatians: The Just Shall Live By Faith". It was read first at the Wisconsin River Valley conference at Schofield in September of 1926 and then a second time at the mixed conference at Rusk in October. Many objected to its freewheeling criticisms and some already detected false doctrine in it. It got to be widely circulated by the time it was read a third time the next spring in Marshfield at a conference before District officials. President Thurow announced that he would not pass judgment on it until he had submitted it to the



Seminary faculty.

Three of the four members of the faculty, A. Pieper, J. Meyer, and W. Henkel, prepared a critique of the Beitz paper called the Gutachten. In its final form it was the work of Prof. Pieper, but it was signed by all the members of the faculty including J. P. Koehler. Koehler had suggested that Beitz be called in to give his own interpretations of the paper, but the rest of the faculty said a document of this nature ought to be clear without any explanations by the author. Koehler said he was going to visit Beitz and really see what the paper was about. When he did, he later withdrew his signature from the Gutachten and wrote his own critique.

Meanwhile the Gutachten was sent to President Thurow, who didn't even bother to consult Beitz but had it printed and sent to teachers and pastors of the District. This very hasty step on his part was to be much criticized just as the document itself. What did the Gutachten say? It maintained that Beitz had preached false doctrine by confusing justification with sanctification, had slandered people by a judging of hearts, held false doctrine with regard to repentance, and was a troublemaker up to no good. If the Gutachten seems harsh, it was extremely so. It condemned the paper and surely seemed like a judgment of Beitz himself.

Even though the faculty was right in the fact that the document ought to be clear in itself, I would think, the charitable thing would have been to do what Koehler had suggested. Beitz should have been consulted and asked

to explain his paper. Then the faculty could have acted as they did. Also President Thurow possibly could have waited for Beitz to explain his paper. But perhaps Prof. Pieper who seemed to be greatly enraged over the Protestants thought nothing would have been settled anyways.

Now what about the Beitz paper? Was it as bad as the Gutachten said it was? In reading the Beitz paper, one certainly does get the impression that all the charges of the Gutachten were true. The only good points that seem to come out of the paper are that the Synod should not be a synod of dead formalism and that faith should be a very real thing in a Christian's life. But Beitz went too far because he thought Synod was already a dead formalistic body and proceeded to say so. Like all the other charges of the Protestants, he couldn't prove his, but then he wouldn't retract his charges either.

Things came to a head in the Western Wisconsin District conference in November of 1927 in Watertown. The meeting there was to iron out situation and hope for a reconciliation. It never came. Both sides were in such an excited and angry mood that the split became wider between Synod and the Protestants. Beitz would not take back anything he had said, and the assembly then rejected it. They also resolved that all who subscribed to it would by their their action break the bond of fellowship with the District. There was no unanimous agreement on this, but it passed anyway. A committee of 12 were appointed to deal with each dissident and if possible fore-

stall any such commitment.

The dissidents answered with the "Elroy Declaration". In it they stated they had no further time for fruitless dealings, the committee had all the necessary information already or could get it, the District at its Beaver Dam and Watertown conventions had been guilty of unheard of godlessness, and that they will take their stand on the Beitz over against the Gutachten. They added that if Synod changes its attitude, then there might be profitable dealings once again.

In February of 1928 the District met again and ratified everything previously done. In all , some 40 pastors and teachers and a number of small congregations were lost to the Synod because of this controversy. Two of the most heartbreaking suspensions of fellowship were that of Prof. Sauer, an outstanding teacher of classics at Northwestern, and Prof. Koehler of the Seminary. Prof. Koehler wrote an article called the Beleuchtung in which he attempted to show that the Beitz paper could be interpreted more charitably and that the Gutachten had misinterpreted the Beitz paper. Professors Pieper and Meyer wrote an especially caustic answer to Koehler's paper. When differences could not be resolved, Koehler was dismissed from the Seminary. No one wanted to do it this way, but there was no choice under the circumstances. To the Protestants, however, his dismissal became the top sin of the dicatorial officials in Synod.

Who was at fault in the Beitz Paper Controversy?

This one seems easy to answer. Synod had no choice but to act as they did. Beitz was wrong or at least he was never able to prove his charges and he would not retract them. The Protestants did not want reconciliation anymore unless it was on their terms. If we are to share any blame, it would only be in the way we acted too hastily perhaps and too bitterly. But perhaps these were the times and our men can not be blamed.

What about today? We have lifted all the suspensions and asked the men to come back. But no, they still bitterly refuse and still bitterly denounce us. They still believe we are wrong and until we say so, nothing will change. Perhaps we are better off without such men who would only cause more trouble in these troubled times.

Could the whole thing have been avoided? Whether you blame the men, the times, or whatever the answer is hard to say. One can say if more Christian love on both sides, especially the Protestants, had been used, yes. If you consider the times and the circumstances, the answer seems to come up, no. The only real thing one can say is that it did happen and we have to live with it. Sooner or later it looks as if the Protestants will die out. Maybe then the whole foolish matter can be forgotten.

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