

Zion: A Double Beginning

submitted by

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If one were to ask a Seminary graduate some of the things he would not look forward to happening in his church, one thing that would probably be high on the list would be a church schism. It was the result of a church schism that Zion Ev. Lutheran Church in Crete, Illinois began. It was because of this schism and a court battle that went to the Illinois State Supreme Court that the Wisconsin Synod had its first church in Crete. The reasons were not doctrinal. The schism resulted over the moving of the church building some three quarters of a mile. In this paper I would like to take a look at the founding of Zion and the controversy behind it. I will do this in 5 parts:

- I. History leading up to 1908.
- II. Controversial meeting of 1908.
- III. Court battles between the factions.
- IV. Conflicting stories.
- V. Lessons to be learned.

The congregations organized as Zion congregation in the year 1849 on a piece of land southeast of Crete known as Beebe's Grove. Their first pastor was Rev. A. P. Weyel. He had arrived in New York City on July 17, 1849. He passed his colloquium and was appointed as a missionary for Will County and the surrounding area with Crete as his home base.<sup>1</sup> His home consisted of a small hut 12 X 12 built out of logs. There were two rooms in this small hut, the larger being the room where the worship services were conducted. Later on the services were conducted in the upper story of one of the member's home, Mr. Rinne. In 1852 Zion Congregation joined the Missouri Synod.<sup>2</sup>

This small congregation would find itself being the mother of several other congregations. One group requested to form a congregation about 7 miles south of Crete because of the distance. They formed St. John's Congregation of Eagle Lake.<sup>3</sup> This congregation is still in existence today. Another group built a church and school about a mile and a half southwest of Crete in Black Walnut in 1855 and called themselves St. Johannis Congregation.<sup>4</sup> This church, however, remained a branch of Zion Congregation. They shared the same pastor. This was a burden for the pastor, however, because of the poor traveling conditions. Pastor Selle on countless occasions tried to bring the two congregations together and build one church. It was not until 1858 that this took place. With 53 total members the two churches merged under the name of Evangelisch-lutherische Dreieinigkeits-Gemeinde. The name Zion disappears until 1911.<sup>5</sup> The new body organized on February 29, 1860 and filed its certificate of incorporation on May 3, 1860.<sup>6</sup>

The two churches bought one acre of land about a half mile south of Crete. The two bodies, however, both kept their own schools. Each "district" was to pay for the salary of its own teachers, with the church standing behind each one to guarantee the salaries. The new body erected its first church in 1860 at a cost of \$2,600.<sup>7</sup> This new location was pretty well situated in the middle of the two old locations. It might also be noted that few people lived in the village of Crete at this time. In 1867 a parsonage was built at the site for the pastor.

Things progressed pretty smoothly for the next 45 years.

There were several changes in pastors during this period. But besides these changes the congregation grew to the size of 176 by 1908. It was during this time in 1872, that a new school district was formed. It was called the Crete district since it was in the village. The congregation now had three separate schools.<sup>8</sup> We also note that the membership in town was rapidly growing. It would be this school district that would begin the bone of contention. It would be out of this school district that the subject matter of the schism would come.

## II.

On July 12, 1908 the Crete School District discussed the need to move the existing church into town. This was discussed at length. One reason was that "the way to church is too arduous for old people and for women with children."<sup>9</sup> They felt there was a need to make it more convenient for those in town who had no transportation. They were also worried that a new church of a different faith would soon be erected in Crete. As a result the following resolution was passed: "It is our wish to have a church in Crete soon, and the Secretary shall inform the congregation of this resolution at its next meeting."<sup>10</sup>

This the Secretary did. At its regular quarterly voters meeting in September, the matter was brought before the congregation. According to the minutes this matter had been discussed on numerous occasions prior to this meeting. They wanted the congregation to realize that their purpose was not to split the church, that was why they were not recommending that a new church be built, but that the church be moved. After a short discussion

of the matter a motion to move the church was defeated by a vote of 44 - 40. It was "resolved to take up the matter at the next meeting."<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that the minutes read "the next meeting" and not the January meeting. This will prove important later. It should also be noted that these minutes were read and approved as read at their November 1 meeting.

On the following Sunday another meeting was held by the Crete School District. This meeting was open to anyone. They felt that that matter was too important to let go. One question was asked at the previous meeting as to whether a suitable piece of land could be found in Crete. Because of this question the Crete School District appointed a committee to concern itself with the purchase of land and what the costs would be to move the church.<sup>12</sup>

An extra meeting of this body was held on October 18, 1908. The purpose of this meeting was to hear the report of this elected committee. The committee reported that they had bought a piece of land of 7 1/2 acres for church purposes from Mr. Gustav Ruppert for \$2,500 and that the moving expenses would cost \$785.00.<sup>13</sup> Twelve members of the district bought the land at this time for several reasons: 1) so that no one could say there was no ground to be had; 2) so that when it was learned that Trinity was looking for land the price would not be jacked up. It was strictly a business deal. The church was not obligated to buy it. At this time the land only belonged to a few members.<sup>14</sup> This report was unanimously accepted and the wish to bring this before the congregation again was approved.

Following the constitution, a special meeting was called on November 1 to further discuss this meeting.<sup>15</sup> After the minutes from the September meeting were read and approved, there was an objection that this meeting had no right discussing this matter since it had been moved to discuss it at the New Year's meeting. It is true that everyone expected the next meeting to be the next quarterly meeting, yet the minutes did not say the January meeting but rather just the next meeting. The report was read and "unanimously resolved upon to take up this matter"<sup>16</sup> for consideration. The minutes say that "a lively, at times vehement, debate," took place.<sup>17</sup> As a result 3 groups emerged: 1) those who were absolutely in favor of moving the church; 2) those who were not opposed as long as the money could be raised; and 3) those who were completely opposed. A motion was made to move the church. After a lengthy discussion, a vote was taken via voce. The chairman decided the ayes had won. The vote was so close that after some discussion the chairman withdrew his decision. Now a new committee was formed using the committee from the Crete School District as part of the committee and appointing several other members from the congregation. The purpose of the committee was: 1) Costs to bring the church to Crete; 2) Acquisition of land; 3) Costs to put the church over a new basement 8 ft. high; 4) Costs to simply put the church on a foundation; 5) Solicit subscriptions. It was resolved to have a meeting in 2 weeks.<sup>18</sup>

On November 15, 1908 another meeting was called to hear the report of this committee. It should be noted that again the minutes from the previous meeting were read and approved. The

committee reported that the total cost would be about \$5,000. They also reported that the subscriptions which were solicited total \$4,510. This report was adopted. The meeting now proceeded to the question of moving the church. It was moved that the vote be taken by ballot and then everyone would be satisfied with the results. After the ballots were counted the vote was 76-56 in favor of moving the church. The minutes say that the discussion of moving the church took place. After the matter had been thoroughly discussed, it was unanimously passed that this moving take place as soon as possible.<sup>19</sup> This was the beginning of the end. The church was moved to a new site about three quarters of a mile north.

It seems that those who had voted "no" were not so willing to give up. A protest was put into writing which objected to the move of the church. It was said to have been signed by 56 members and delivered to the pastor.<sup>20</sup> In the next meeting on January 2, 1909, the pastor reported that a few of the members had made a protest in writing. It was asked if anyone at the meeting objected to the meeting and no one replied. The minutes of both meetings were accepted as read.<sup>21</sup>

Another meeting was called on January 31, 1909 to investigate this controversy which had started. The group in the county said that the present church which moved to Crete was no longer the congregation but they were. Rev. Henry Engelbrecht, the President of the Northern Illinois District of the Missouri Synod was present at the meeting. After both sides had spoken the question was placed to him, "Who is the congregation?" The

President answered, "I could not decide otherwise than to say that this is the old Trinity Congregation here now assembled."<sup>21</sup>

### III.

The country faction did not give up. They were determined to keep a church at the original site. In March they hauled several loads of stone and building material to the existing site, tearing down gates and locks. The members of Trinity found it necessary to file a court injunction which read:

You are hereby notified and warned not to trespass or haul any material onto any property belonging to the German Evangelical Lutheran Trinity Congregation of the Unaltered Augsburgische Confession at Crete, Illinois.<sup>22</sup>

This was the beginning of these two groups fight in court. The circuit court of Joliet decided in favor of the dissenting group and ruled that the land be sold and divided up.

The Village group quickly appealed their case to the State Supreme Court. After a drawn out affair the Supreme Court rendered a decision in favor of the Village group. The dissenters did not give up, but petitioned the Synod for ministerial services. The Synod said that this would be granted only if the group would recognize Trinity as the true and original church, implying that they were guilty of the schism. Instead of recognizing their guilt they went to the Wisconsin Synod for help. Trinity made a formal protest to the Wisconsin Synod concerning this action. After a long delay, another investigation was made and it wasn't until 1913 that a peace agreement was made.<sup>24</sup> It can be said that this was only on paper for the two did not worship together again until a joint reformation service



was held in 1946.<sup>25</sup>

The dissenters then re-organized under the name Zion Ev. Lutheran Church. Dr. Henry Wente was installed as its first Pastor on August 28, 1910. On September 10, 1911, Zion dedicated its house of worship. The total cost was about \$13,000. They also built a large parsonage for the pastor and moved the old school to the new site on the southwest corner of the village where it still exists today.<sup>26</sup>

#### IV.

When one reads the accounts from the court proceedings, one finds many conflicting stories. Those from the dissenting side say that Engelking, who earnestly opposed the move, made the statement to move the church as quickly as possible in a fit of rage. They say that it was never intended to be a motion.<sup>27</sup> Yet countless testimony, including the minutes, show that Engelking was questioned as to whether or not the statement was intended as a motion. He is quoted to have said that it was intended as a motion.<sup>28</sup>

There is also conflicting testimony about those who were left at the end of the meeting. Some say that many members left before the motion to move the church was put to the body.<sup>29</sup> The minutes and other testimony state otherwise.<sup>30</sup> If they did leave this was a transgression of the constitution which states that no one can leave the meeting before its end without first asking permission.<sup>31</sup>

The dissenters argue about the purchase of land by the District. They claim that the District had no right to purchase

Yet from testimony and minutes it is apparent that the group secured the land for themselves with the intent of selling whatever portion the Church wanted.

The list of arguments is numerous. One might ask, "Who is right?" The court ruled in favor of Trinity. From the minutes it appears that Zion acted out of stubbornness not to conform. It seems as if things went pretty well according to the laws of the said constitution. This is not to say that Trinity may have slipped up somewhere, and it is not recorded. Yet if these minutes were to be changed a protest should have been made at the ratifying of these minutes. If there were no objections, then one can assume they are correct. The evidence weighs heavily in favor of Trinity. It appears that after it was decided to move the church that a majority of the people were willing to go along with the decision. It wasn't until after the protest was passed around that the trouble really began. It seems to be a matter that began to snowball and get out of hand. It is evident that the country faction got to the point where they were unwilling to settle their differences.

V.

There is a lesson in this for all. At times it seems as if it is monotonous and stupid to follow parliamentary law to the letter. Yet we see that good records and proper procedure are necessary to put down strong dissenters. Proper procedures and records will help in settling disputes. All the formality in a church meeting is not just meaningless rhetoric, but necessary procedure.

It is also necessary to have a proper file of organization with the state and elected trustees. This too helped Trinity win the battle. The farmer faction insisted that they were the existing congregation, yet they were not the ones with the proper papers or trustees. This is why Zion could not lay claim to the old property.

Even though Synodical officials requested that the two groups reunite, it never happened. Trinity invited them on countless times to come back, but the dissenters were convinced that this could never happen. Today Trinity has also left the LCMS and has joined WELS because of confessional reasons. The schism has slowly been disappearing. As new people join both churches the old story fades. Yet the controversy is still brought up when both churches work on joint projects. Maybe some day it will be forgotten. The writer of this paper can remember that when he was a member of Zion Lutheran School, the friction was still very real. Even though that attitude was around the writer has established many friendships with those at Trinity. It is my prayer that this animosity subsides completely some day and that Christian love will be completely expressed by both sides.

1. <sup>Schwartzkopf</sup> St. Louis, The Lutheran Trail, (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1950), p. 60.
- 2 Ibid., p. 61.
- 3 Ibid., p. 62.
- 4 Proceeding of the Supreme Court of Illinois to the June term, A.D., 1910, p. 18.
5. <sup>Schwartzkopf</sup> St. Louis, The Lutheran Trail, (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1950), p. 63.
- 6 Proceeding of The Supreme Court of Illinois to the June term, A.D., 1910, p.2-3.
7. <sup>schwartzkopf</sup> St. Louis, The Lutheran Trail, (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1950), p. 63.
- 8 Proceeding of the Supreme Court of Illinois to the June term, A.D., 1910, p. 29-30.
- 9 Ibid., p.51.
- 10 Ibid., p. 52.
- 11 Ibid., p. 52.
- 12 Ibid., p. 54.
- 13 Ibid., p. 54.
- 14 Ibid., p. 213.
- 15 Ibid., p.63.
- 16 Ibid., p. 54.
- 17 Ibid., p. 55.
- 18 Ibid., p. 55-56.
- 19 Ibid., p.56-58.
- 20 Ibid., p. 32-33.
- 21 Ibid., p. 64-65.
- 22 Ibid., p. 184.
- 23 Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 65-66.

<sup>25</sup>Church Minutes, Oct. 7, 1945.

<sup>26</sup>Bulletin insert of Golden Anniversary Celebration.

<sup>27</sup>Proceeding of the Supreme Court of Illinois to the June term,  
A.D., 1910, p. 30.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p.77.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 29-30.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Schwartzdopf, Louis. The Lutheran Trail, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950. pp. 59-68, 494-495.

Proceeding of the Supreme Court of Illinois to the June term,  
A.D., 1910.

Golden Anniversary Bulletin

Pastor R. Pasbrig, pastor of Zion Ev. Lutheran Church.

Church Minutes