

A Day in the Light for the
Synod of the Northwest

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The sheep gently frolicked on the knoll, then returned to nibbling on the sweet grass. Their wool coats glistened with an immaculate luster in the afternoon sun. There were similar flocks on other hills, and a shepherd tended every flock. A peaceful, pastoral scene is painted in our minds.

The flocks belong to the Synod of the Northwest. Formed in 1891 as a result of mission work by the Augustana Synod among English-speaking people, now in the 1950's, faith was in evidence among her people. There were blind spots, danger zones within her confession. She was in the General Council. Her constitution read that the Word was an infallible guide in faith and practice,¹ not that it was unconditionally infallible. Membership in lodges which taught salvation by works was tolerated. Still, many of the flocks enjoyed the sunshine of the Gospel, and depended on their Savior alone to atone for their sins.

There were three shepherds in this synod who were neighbors, and they went together to do some post-graduate work at Maywood Seminary, which was the seminary of the Illinois Synod. The Illinois

¹Rev. James T Bishop, personal interview.

Synod and the Synod of the Northwest were both members of the United Lutheran Church in America. Later, in October of 1954,² the ^{Pastors} taught together in joint Sunday School teachers meetings. At this time, what they taught was disturbing wider and wider circles of the clergy and members of the Synod of the Northwest. Two examples of what they were teaching the Sunday School teachers to teach the children are: "It is misleading to teach children to sing 'Jesus Loves Me,' for Jesus loved only the people whom he knew." "One can't take miracles as being true because many things were added to make them interesting."³

Who are these shepherds? Rev. George Crist of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Durham; Rev. John Gerberding of Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Menomonee Falls; and Rev. Victor K. Wrigley, Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Brookfield, Wisconsin. Their teachings show that they presupposed that the Scriptures are not infallible, but simply man's reaction to God's revelation. Their teachings were leading people away from Jesus who is God with us, to a man Jesus who is an example to us on how to please God. They lead us from salvation as a free gift to salvation to be earned by each man's performance in this world.

²"Three-Story Universe--Lutheran Heresy Trial," The Nation (March 10, 1956), p. 198.

³Ibid.

These three shepherds were actually ravening wolves, instruments of Satan to rob the sheep of their faith.

The English Evangelical Lutheran Synod of the Northwest, or just the Synod of the Northwest, was an autonomous synod, and its ties with the ULCA were a loose association. Its constitution called for a trial of any pastors in the synod which a congregation formally issued a complaint to the synod about for being heretical in their beliefs or teachings.⁴ The President of the Synod, Dr. Paul E. Bishop, personally conferred with the three pastors to show them the error in their teachings. They refused to budge in their doctrinal stance.⁵ He ordered an official investigation in February of 1955. This was the dawn of day in the light for the Synod of the Northwest.

The reaction of the synod to these three pastors' teachings was their stand for sound Lutheran teaching in their synod. This was their chance to take a course which would lead them to a more orthodox position, doctrinal stance, and thus preserve the faith that many of their members had in Jesus Christ

⁴Rev. James T. Bishop.

⁵"Hopes Pastors Will See Errors," Milwaukee Journal, (July 1, 1955).

as the Son of God, their Savior.

The findings of the investigating committees resulted in the President of the Synod calling for trials for the three pastors. The three issued a joint reaction, "Statement of a Point of View in Relation to Certain Suggested Deviations." It was their defense for their point of view, but it made their errors that much more apparent. A few excerpts will be sufficient to illustrate this:

The Bible is not Word of God in an objective sense as though the words of the Bible were God's words; the words are the words of men communicating something of their own personal, existential encounter with God on the level of Spirit WHERE ALONE GOD CAN BE MET. It is proper, in a Biblical sense, to speak of the Bible as the Word of God only in the sense of possibility and occasion for OUR encounter with God, or as the witness to such encounter in times past.

What is affirmed, in faith, by the doctrine of the virgin birth, is that Jesus is the Word of God! That God, who is Spirit, was active in him so that it could actually be said - but ONLY on the level of Spirit - that he and the Father are one, and he who sees Jesus sees the Father! This is faith's affirmation that Jesus is "the Way, the Truth and the Life." 6

They were speaking for modern theology. Much of Protestantism was persuaded to read the Scriptures as fallible writings of men in reaction to a great man, Jesus Christ, and much of Lutheranism was tending toward the same theology. The fact that Maywood Seminary was teaching thus, and the Illinois Synod was in the ULCA, shows that these teachings were

⁶Rev. George P. Crist, et al, "Statement of a Point of View in Relation to Suggested Deviations." p. 2

threateningly close to the Synod of the Northwest. In that same year, Professor William H. Cooper took advantage of the opportunity afforded by the above "Statement" to witness to the light, to testify of the one true Christ, in reply to the "Statement" of the three pastors. He quotes from their paper, then replies.

"God is not one who speaks words. A man may speak about God in words, but the words are never God's words." This is in direct contradiction of the whole Bible, Old and New Testament which from beginning to end presents the God who speaks, and the men who speak God's words at God's command. Compare Jeremiah's call in Jeremiah 1:9, "And Jehovah said unto me 'Behold I have put my words in thy mouth.'" 7

He also shows the indentity between the teachings of the three pastors to those of Charles Fillmore, then says:

These quotations from a leader of the sect known as the Unity School have been supplied to me by Dr. Ahlen. They are shown by him in his courses on Sectarianism in Northwestern Seminary to be not only unorthodox but anti-Christian. I can see no difference between the opinions of Fillmore and the doctrine of God contained in this statement signed by our three brethren. Dr. Ahlen was struck with the similarity and calls it to my attention. This is the doctrine we are steadily and consistently counteracting at the Seminary as subversive of Christianity. 8

7"Notes by Professor Wm. H. Cooper on 'The Statement of a Point of View, etc,' Signed by George P. Crist, John H. Gerberding and Victor K. Wrigley. 1955. p. 2.

8Ibid.

So there were two professors at the Synod's seminary who took a direct stand against the modern theology espoused by the three pastors. The seminary was known for its conservative, orthodox position on the Scriptures.⁹

The first trial was a fine testimony to the world that it does matter what a pastor teaches. The Synod of the Northwest benefited by clarifying what it taught and believed through this trial. Rev. George Crist was accused of heresy on 14 counts by the investigating committee: Attitude toward and use of Holy Scripture, holding the opinion that Jesus was born of a virgin is unnecessary, physical resurrection didn't happen, no real presence in Holy Communion, no baptismal regeneration, miracles did not happen, no Transfiguration or Ascension of Christ, intercessory prayer is powerless since Jesus doesn't hear prayers, prayer is entirely useless except that it changes the one praying, Jesus does not love us here and now, his opinions are as good as the Scriptures, he does not set forth the Gospel in its fullness, confused Law and Gospel, and man was never totally good and did not inherit his sinful nature by Adam's fall.¹⁰ Of course if the first problem

⁹Rev. Charles B. Burmeister, personal interview.

¹⁰"Report of the Trial Committee Concerning the Rev. George P. Christ," Special Convention of The English Evangelical Lutheran Synod of the Northwest (January 23, 1956), p. 3.

was not there, the other problems would not be either. The jury found him guilty on 10 of the charges. The Synod adopted the report of the trial committee, and rejected Rev. Crist's appeal on the findings. President Bishop had suspended his office of the ministry, the congregation recognized it, and he surrendered his ordination certificate to the Synod, all in 1955.¹¹

The Milwaukee Journal and Sentinel newspapers gave the heresy proceedings continual coverage. Included in their columns were invitations to other pulpits to pastor Crist from the Unitarians and even one Baptist. Finally he ended up accepting a quarter-time research assistantship at the University of Iowa, and a part-time ministry in a Congregational church there.¹² The Synod of the Northwest had given a clear testimony to the Truth, and it had potential for guiding the Synod in an even more orthodox path.

The next pastor to come to trial was Rev. John Gerberding. He was charged on 8 counts, which were similar to those of Rev. Crist: denial of the divine authority of Scripture, denial of the resurrection, the Virgin Birth, Ascension, many miracles, Lord's Supper, and Baptism. Rev. Gerberding made a statement to the trial committee on August 31st, 1955, and the trial committee found him not guilty on all counts. An example on the 1st charge is his "affirm-

¹¹Ibid, p. 6

¹²Rev. Burmeister.

ation:"

The Canonical Books of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Ghost, the only infallible rule of faith and practice . . . by which rule . . . all questions of faith and practice shall be decided. 13

The problem is that when he stated that the Bible is "the only infallible rule of faith and practice," the jurors must have thought he meant that the Bible is infallible. But he told reporters after his trial, "he has not changed any of his opinions and was not asked to."¹⁴ The committee had recommended a year for him at the Seminary to insure that he was straightened out, and a year's salary was to be given to him to enable him to attend the Seminary easily. It is possible that the committee was acting charitably, or that they were fooled by the words he had hidden behind in his statement to them. But when his words hit the press in the article quoted above, there was a considerable stir in the Synod.

Rev. Arno D. Martin of Nativity Church proposed a resolution for a "sweeping re-investigation of the Rev. John Gerberding's heresy case."¹⁵ He stated,

We are not bringing in this resolution in the spirit of vindictiveness. At the same time, when it comes to a question involving God's word, I, for one, want it cleared up. 16

¹³ "John Gerberding Statement to the Trial Committee," Special Convention p. 12.

¹⁴ Milwaukee Sentinel, (September 2, 1955).

¹⁵ "Synod Calls For New Gerberding Probe," Milwaukee Journal, (September 2, 1955).

¹⁶ Ibid.

Thirty-five pastors signed a petition requesting a new trial. Rev. Gerberding was persuaded to resign and take up secular work. The Synod Convention considered that they had completed necessary actions in regard to his case.¹⁷

This trial was not as clear-cut as the Crist case had been. The fact that Gerberding was at first cleared of all charges, even though he believed the same things that George Crist had, introduced an element of doubt into the overall witness the Synod was giving to its own members and to the world. The last case shows the possibility of decline in the light the Synod had been enjoying.

The congregation of the Rev. Victor K. Wrigley stood behind their pastor, and forbade him to cooperate with the investigating committee or the trial committee. The Synod continued in the light at this time, suspending him from his office and finding him guilty of all charges, which were similar to those of his two predecessors.¹⁸

But his congregation refused to surrender him. He encouraged them to hold out, and see what the Synod would do. Two years later, the Synod came through for the powers of darkness. An examining committee approved a new statement he made to them, and the Synod adopted a report clearing him of all

¹⁷Special Convention p. 15.

¹⁸"Report of the Trial Committee Concerning the Trial of the Rev. Victor K. Wrigley," Ibid, p. 8.

charges. It was done quickly, without discussion, in 10 minutes.¹⁹ Rev. A. A. Zinck, who presented the report, told reporters later,

I sensed that the temperament of the delegates was that they wanted no further controversy. Far be it from me to start it all over again. ²⁰

Rev. Wrigley's statement was similar to John Gerberding's.²¹

It was in words that each side could understand in their own way. Many did not like this end for the case, but nothing was done about it. Pastor Victor Wrigley was re-ordained. The direction of the Synod of the Northwest had changed. Dusk was upon them. Their day in the light of becoming doctrinally purer was coming to an end. [†]A short five years later the Synod of the Northwest gave up its autonomy and became a part of the Lutheran Church in America, known for its general poor stance on the Scriptures. The lives of the sheep are in constant danger. The members of the old Synod of the Northwest could put their faith in a person who was just a man, and in earning their own salvation, instead of Jesus Christ who is true God and man, able to save us from our sins.

¹⁹"Change Constitution, Wrigley Church Told," Milwaukee Journal, (May 22, 1957), part 2, p. 12.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Rev. Burmeister.

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