SLAVERY AND AMERICAN LUTHERANISM
A Selective Study of American Lutheranism's Reactions to the Issue of Slavery.

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What is the purpose of the Christian Church? On what issues does a church body speak out, and on what issues does it remain silent? These are questions with which the visible church has struggled for centuries. Very often the conclusions which different denominations reached were simply strong responses to emotional issues; whether it was the conclusion in the era of the Crusades which declared that it was imperative that the Holy Land be reclaimed, or whether it's the opinion in many church bodies today which states that the Church has the right,even the responsibility, to take an active stand against apartheid, the U.S. role in Central America, etc. For those of us who have been blessed with a true Christ-centered, Gospel-centered church body, the distinctions which must be drawn in considering the Church's role are rather clear. Even then, however, there is no guarantee that there will be smooth sailing for congregational leaders who find themselves in an emotionally volatile controversy (e.g. WELS pastors in the North Country who have members on either side of the spearfishing issue). For those church bodies to which distinctions are not so clear, a strong political or non-ecclesiastical issue can mushroom until it dominates all else.

The question of slavery in this country was just such an issue in the mid-ninteenth century, before the American Civil War. The issue heated up until it became red-hot in the 1850's with the publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin. With that book, tempers flared. Fact and fiction became indistinguishable. The mental pictures of both Southerners and Northerners were viciously distorted (Andersen p.42). In such a climate, church bodies began to be affected. The Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists all

experienced splits in connection with the issue. And while American Lutheranism did not have any official breaks until the regional divisions caused by the Civil War made it absolutely necessary, yet the issue did definitely make itself felt. This paper is a sampling of how American Lutherans responded to the issue of slavery. It will include the Franckean Synod; Southern Lutheran reactions to Northern abolitionists; S.S. Schmucker; and C.F.W. Walther. Within this framework there will also be a discussion about the relationship between the Franckeans and S.S. Schmucker, and the affect of Walther's position upon the Norwegian Synod.

In general, the English-speaking synods spoke out much more vigorously against slavery than did the non-English synods (Allbeck p. 174). As early as 1822, the Tennessee Synod called slavery "a great evil" and wished "that government, if possible, would devise some means as an antidote to this evil." In 1827, the Ohio Synod gave its approval to the purpose of the Ohio Society, an anti-slavery group which had devised a colonization plan in order to remove blacks from the nation. In 1836 a resolution was introduced in the Hartwick Synod expressing "the abhorrence of this body relative to the system of slavery in the United States." (Nelson pp 142-143). After the outbreak of the Civil War, the General Synod, in 1862, adopted a resolution which said, in part, "We...regard this rebellion as more immediately the natural result of the continuance and spread of domestic slavery in our land." A delegation took a copy of the resolution to Washington, D.C. and presented it to President Lincoln. The President's reply included the General Synod Lutherans among the "enlightened, influential

and loyal class of my fellow citizens" (Heathcote pp 75-80). American Lutherans, particularly the English synods, did indeed decide to speak out against slavery.

However, when it came to bare-knuckled Abolition*ism*, one group of Lutherans outshined them all: "In May, 1837, at a meeting of pastors and laymen in central and east-central New York who were dissatisfied with the trend in the Hartwick Synod, a constitution with certain unusual provisions was unanimously adopted. No layman was to be entitled to a seat in the conventions who was a slaveholder or in the liquor business; no minister could be a member of the synod who was a slaveholder, or who trafficked in human beings, or who advocated the system of slavery as it existed in the United States" (Fortenbaugh p 76). The Franckean Synod was born. The following day the new synod passed four resolutions against slavery. The first resolution read, in part, "That Slavery as it exists in the United States...is a sin...., opposed to the spirit of the Gospel and a violation of the inalienable rights of man." Resolution two was even more pointed:"That we do not deem it inexpedient for ecclesiastical bodies to interfere with the abolition of slavery; but that it is the duty of all such bodies of every evangelical denomination, to bear their decided testimony against the Sin of Slavery" (Fortenbaugh p 77).

If one wanted to find an Abolitionist Lutheran Synod, the Franckean Synod would fit the description perfectly. The attitude of the Franckean Synod with respect to slavery represented the greatest degree of opposition to that institution to be found among Lutheran bodies; it's felt that no group in any denomination exhibited a more extreme position.

How did a nominally Lutheran church body manage to outdo even other denominations in its abolitionist fervor? Part of the answer can be found in the area in which the Franckean Synod was located. Their particular section of New York was a hotbed for Abolitionism. Also, the Lutheran church was not strong there. Very possibly, the Lutheran church leaders wanted to show their neighbors that they were not some odd little sect; that they were "part of the gang." What better way to get along with your Abolitionist neighbors than to start raising the battle cry of Abolitionism yourself? Peer pressure can be a powerful thing.

The Franckeans were not a synod of mere Abolitionist resolutions. They were a synod of Abolitionist action. They looked upon their efforts as part of what they called "the new reformation." They officially supported and were actively involved with anti-slavery groups. They started their own newspaper, the "Lutheran Herald." By its own proclamation, the "Lutheran Herald" was designed as an "efficient instrument for the final overthrow and complete death of the indescribable sin of slavery." On the list of contributors to the "Lutheran Herald" was the famous abolitionist leader, Gerrit Smith (Kuenning pp 179-180).

The Franckean Synod not only worked hard to rid the nation of slavery. It also earnestly tried to persuade other Lutheran Synods to adopt a staunch anti-slavery position. In 1842 they issued what has been described as the most explosive anti-slavery document ever to come from a Lutheran church body. Labeled the "Fraternal Appeal," the statement was printed in the "Lutheran Herald" and sent to all the Lutheran Synods in America.

In their fervor to make the slavery issue a Lutheran issue, the Franckeans used very strong language in the "Appeal." Excerpts from the statement speak for themselves: "The account which you must render at the inflexible bar of Christ, should persuade you to pray and labor for the immediate suppression of slavery, and the elevation of the downcast and down-trodden. Look upon the groaning slave in the prison-house of bondage, stripped of his rights, and bleeding at every pore"..."Faith without works is dead--we wish for action; the slave in chains imploringly prays for decisive ACTION, and the God of love, grace, purity and immutable justice sternly demands uncompromising ACTION against every abomination of the land"..."Nothing will save this nation and the churches of this land from the curse of Jehovah, but the practical demonstration of the equalizing principle of the gospel, of religion and republican liberty, that the human race are encompassed by one common brotherhood, therefore the necessity for decisive action on your part against the sin of slavery" (Stange p47).

On the whole, the other Lutheran synods responded to the Franckeans' "Fraternal Appeal" with an emphatic silence. It was this lack of response against which the Franckeans concentrated their attack. They repeatedly called silence a sin, and condemned those who supported slavery by "their masterful inactivity." Silence and neutrality were often described as more evil than an open defense of slavery because of the hypocrisy involved. One Franckean declared that the minister who claims that "he is opposed to slavery as much as any man and believes it to be a sin, and opens not his mouth for the oppressed poor and downtrodden

dumb, should be hurled from the pulpit." Nicholas Van Alstine wrote in the "Lutheran Herald" against the stand of silence. He wrote,"Look at it (your stand of silence) and turn it to the crushed and wailing slave and then read it before the judgment bar of Almighty God...Can you say that you...administered to the distressed, or have you shut up your bowels of compassion to the groaning slave and composed your nervous arm on the lazy lap of neutrality and dead faith?"(Kuenning pp 181-183).

The Franckean Synod, in the years 1844-47, demonstrated their unique version of fellowship principles. It resolved that it could not hold fellowship with any ecclesiastical body which tolerated, apologized for, or was silent on the sin of American slavery, especially if such bodies defended the sin by an appeal to the Bible, which to them was blasphemy. During this period, they also condemned the War with Mexico as something started and carried out for the sole protection, perpetuation, and enlargement of the system of American slavery; and it was resolved that it was in the province of the pulpit to speak out and bring light and truth before the people on this subject (Fortenbaugh pp 83-84).

Lutherans in the South, of course, were not only aware of the actions taken by the Franckean Synod, but of Northern Abolitionism in general. Southern Lutherans were not numerous, but some did own slaves. There were Lutheran churches which had slaves attending services regularly (Ahrendt pp 30-31). Their reaction to the Franckeans was one of resentment. They felt that these zealots from the North were naive and misinformed, and they didn't care for the fact that this little synod from New York was trying to tell them how to be good Christians. Yet, in comparison to the

intensity of the Franckeans' pronouncements, the responses from the Lutherans in the South seldom seemed any stronger than a "Mind your own business" tone. When one reads portions from the 1847 minutes of the Synod of North Carolina, one gets the impression that there was irritation felt over against the Franckeans, but only enough to raise those Southern Lutherans' eyebrows. The Corresponding Secretarey reported his examination of the proceedings of the Franckean Synod and noted that it had "utterly disfellowshipped us." The synod, after discussion of this report, resolved to instruct the secretary to return the incendiary document, in the form of a Minute, "to the source from whence it came"(Fortenbaugh p 85). The Synod of North Carolina appears to have been the only one in which slavery was defended to take official notice of the action of the Franckean Synod.

Southerners in general had often appealed to the Bible for the support of slavery (Sernett p 72). With the Civil War came the separation of the four synods of North and South Carolina, Virginia, and Southwest Virginia, which, subsequently uniting with Georgia and the independent ministeriums of Tennessee and Holston, became the "United Synod of the South" (Faust p 412). At the formation of this new church body in 1862, the Southern Lutherans used Scripture as well to defend slavery. Early on they issued a document entitled,"Expression on Slavery." Parts of it read as follows:"We find it (slavery) existing in our midst and only feel bound to regard the moral relation that exists between the master and the slave. If slavery be a sin and in this respect only can the institution be a sin--the Church has the authority to call her members to account and legislate upon the subject. Sin is the

transgression of the moral law. What divine law does slavery violate? No express command. No, thus saith the Lord; not even the golden rule of our Redeemer. To do unto others as you would have them do unto you...The Word of God is the only rule to guide us in determining this question, and not the deductions of philosophy falsely so called" (Heathcote pp 97-98).

Another key figure in the area of Abolitionism in Lutheranism was Samuel Simon Schmucker, the giant at Gettysburg Seminary. Schmucker was an Abolitionist, and he made no secret of his position in this matter. He preached on the subject, made addresses on it, and published materials about it. When through his marriage to a Virginia woman in October of 1825, he found himself a slaveholder in a state that did not allow the freeing of slaves, he spoke of his slaves as servants, provided them with spiritual ministry, and arranged for their elementary education. When he moved to Pennsylvania the next year, he took some of these servants along and freed them (Wentz, "Pioneer" p 317). One, however, refused to be freed, and had to be kept on as a slave (Stange, "Schmucker" p 82).

Besides feeling that the kind of slavery described in the Bible was vastly different from the system of American slavery, Schmucker also appealed to man-made principles to support his stand against slavery. In August of 1845, he delivered a lecture on slavery to the Senior class of the Seminary at Gettysburg. His opening point was this:"That God has of one blood created all nations to dwell on the face of the earth, has endowed them all with the powers of moral agents and invested them all with certain inalienable rights and obligations, such as life, liberty, the

pursuit of happiness, and the discharge of what they believe to be their religious duties" (Stange, "Schmucker" p 79).

The Franckeans and Schmucker were both visible elements in Lutheranism as far as the slavery issue was concerned. But while there were times of mutual admiration and agreement, there was never a time when the Franckean Synod and Schmucker were truly close. There were a number of reasons for this. One was geographic. Because Harwick Seminary was where the Franckean clergy received their training rather than Gettysburg, they had no direct contact with Schmucker and had to base their judgments of him almost entirely upon what they read and heard.

Another reason was because ~~of the fact that~~ the Franckeans were excluded from the General Synod, at least for a time. Without the ability to meet on a regular basis at district conventions, synod conventions, etc., they were not able to feel each other out on the slavery issue, nor could they encourage each other in the cause of abolition.

Besides these practical reasons, however, there were also deep-seated differences. Schmucker had grown up in the South. He had confidence that the slave-owner could gradually change the situation which Schmucker so ardently opposed; Schmucker once said,"Emancipation should be immediate in principle yet the bestowal of liberty gradual"(Stange, Schmucker p 83). The Franckeans, on the other hand, were strictly Northern Abolitionists. They had no first-hand contact with Southern attitudes and mores. They had little or no confidence in the South's ability to gradually do away with the institution of slavery. They demanded IMMEDIATE abolition.

The greatest difference which separated these two elements of Abolitionism was the intensity of Schmucker's dedication to church union. It was his dream to unify all the churches in a common bond. He had given his life to the creation and expansion of the General Synod in order to unify the Lutheran Church in the U.S. As much as abolition meant to him, still he was willing to set it aside temporarily if it ever became a stumblingblock for ecumenism. To the Franckeans, however, abolitionism was supreme. Slavery was a terrible sin, pure and simple. To set aside the slavery issue in order to worship with a slaveholding church body would have been to them what setting aside the Augsburg Confession in order to worship with Catholics would be to us. It was just unthinkable. For these reasons, there was always a certain amount of distance between the Franckean Synod and S.S. Schmucker (Kuenning pp 224-227).

Our attention now turns to the Saxons along the Mississippi, the Missouri Synod; especially its leader, C.F.W. Walther. How did they respond to the slavery issue in what was considered a border state with the slave-holding South? The Missouri Synod was composed almost entirely of Germans, and the vast majority of immigrant Germans of all classes in the state of Missouri opposed slavery and supported the Union during the War. In Missouri the strong German element saved St. Louis from the secessionists and took the initiative in saving the whole state for the Union (Wentz, Basic History p 168).

However, there was one notable exception: Walther himself. Indications are that Walther was a Democrat by inclination. The Democrats constituted the conservative element and did attract the

older group among the German population of the state. The Abolitionists were all Republicans. The Republicans had among their ranks not only Abolitionists, but also radical freethinkers and atheists. His personal experience with Republicans had been negative. In a letter to a friend in Cleveland in April of 1861, Walther wrote of the situation in St. Louis. He noted that the area was soon to become a battleground between state and Union forces, and he believed that the "Abolitionist-Republican Party" was in large degree responsible for this development (Kavasch pp 104-105). Since Walther was aware of the potentially dangerous radicals which called the Republican Party their home, and since Walther had seen with his own eyes what these radical elements were capable of doing, one can understand why he had little time for them or their cause, why he called them the "Umsturzpartei," the party of revolution.As will be explained presently, Walther did state that Scripture did not forbid slavery; but it's this writer's opinion that Walther was not so much pro-slavery as he was anti-revolution, anti-radical, anti-zealot. Simply put, that characteristic which served Walther so admirably in his theology was bound to color his personal opinions as well.

But while Walther's personal opinions may have been anti-abolition, he always made a clear distinction between personal opinions and God's directives in Scripture. The rest of the Missouri Synod's clergy did the same. And so there is no record of any instance in which they took an official position as churchmen. Even though they may not have been in sympathy with the platform and aims of the Republican Party, when Lincoln issued a call for men, the pastors urged their people to obey the voice of

government. When presidential proclamation called for a day of humiliation and prayer, Walther preached from the pulpit about the praise-worthy proclamation which the beloved God-given government of the country had issued. He urged that all congregations observe it. He had no difficulty commending his hearers for their obedience to the government. The Biblical principle was clear; they had lived accordingly (Kavasch pp 105-106).

In order to emphasize that the whole matter of slavery was a non-ecclesiastical, political matter, Walther took the issue up in the periodical, "Lehre und Wehre." There, Walther let Scripture speak. He presented numerous references to prove slavery was not sinful. Unpleasant a situation as it might well be, it was nevertheless permitted by God. To consider slavery itself as sinful, then, was untrue. Furthermore, it was one aspect of the "duty" principle of the Fourth Commandment, as well as the Tenth. The apostles never condemned it. Instead, they set down rules to govern men, masters as well as slaves, wherever slavery existed. Walther concluded that the Christian should consider the whole matter a neutral issue (Kavasch p 108).

How Missouri's stand on the slavery question differed from the stand taken by the radical Franckeans or even the moderate Schmucker can be seen when one notes the difference in the premises upon which either group set up its line of thinking. The claim made by the Lutherans who officially opposed slavery that all men were free and equal because Christ died to make men free was to the Missouri Synod leaders a complete misinterpretation of Scripture. The freedom which Christ gained for all men was a spiritual blessing. Spiritual freedom was not tantamount to

temporal freedom. Walther also pointed out that man's so-called "inalienable rights" to political liberty were not inalienable at all, and the belief that they were was contrary to Scripture (Kavasch pp 68-69).

Even though Walther's personal views on the issues involved with the Civil War obviously never became official statements of the Missouri Synod, there was a time toward the end of the conflict when those views caused him to be concerned for his safety. In 1865 an oath of loyalty was demanded of all clergymen and other public figures by the new State Government. It was an oath which men in public office were to take by a certain date under threat of imprisonment or fine or both, stating that they had never in word or deed said or done anything to hinder the cause of the Union or to aid or comfort its enemies. Walther could not unconditionally take this oath. Although he had not raised a hand to strike a blow against the Union, he had, nevertheless, at times said things which did not exactly aid the cause of the Union. Walther did not want to lie. For a time, Walther thought seriously about moving the Seminary to Addison, Ill., to avoid taking the oath; but after trying several times without success to take the oath with reservations, he finally decided to refuse and to suffer the consequences. Fortunately, the courts condemned the oath as unconstitutional since it created a crime "ex post facto." Needless to say, Walther was greatly relieved (Suelflow p 116).

While the laity in Walther's Missouri Synod seemed to have little trouble appreciating the distinction between ecclesiastical and political concerns, the lay people in the Norwegian Synod were a different matter entirely. Prof. Larsen was the Norwegian

Synod's representative on the Seminary faculty at St. Louis, and also a close friend of Walther's. When the Norwegian Synod's students came home from St. Louis at the start of the War, they brought with them the impression that the faculty there was secessionistic and pro-slavery. The editor of "Emigranten" ("The Emigrant"), a Norwegian political newspaper, requested Larsen to explain what the stand of the faculty was. Larsen remained silent, correctly thinking that it was not his place to publish personal views on political issues, nor was it anyone else's business to know them. "Emigranten" took this silence to mean that the charges made against the faculty were true, and proceeded to denounce roundly anyone who could hold such views. Again, Larsen was challenged to explain whether he was for or against the following points: 1.Slavery is not sin; 2.To oppose the execution of the laws of the United States in the Slave States is not sin.

Larsen decided that he had better respond in order to clear up the confusion that had been created. Concerning the first statement he showed with Scripture that slavery in itself was not sin. Concerning the second statement, he agreed that every soul should be subject to the higher powers, but someone in a seceded state might not so readily know which power to obey, the federal or the state. In other words, the issue was not a simple one.

What was meant to clear up confusion ended up throwing turmoil into the Norwegian Synod, turmoil which did not die down until 1868, three years after Appomattox. The issue bounced from conferences to faculty to Synod President and back again. The basic picture of what happened was this: The clergy of the Norwegian Synod agreed with Larsen, saying that slavery was an

evil (a result of sin, like poverty and ignorance), but not a sin in itself. The laymen of the Synod thought that such a distinction was foolish and useless; they wanted to take an official stand against slavery.They saw slavery as a sin no matter how it was sliced. They suspected that the clergy were just using double talk to keep the laity from having any say in the Synod. On the one side,for the laity, was Rev. C.L. Clausen, who became a vacillating and at times an almost pathetic figure in connection with this issue until he left the Synod in 1868, taking his Big Canoe congregation with him. On the other side, for the clergy, was Prof. Larsen, who tried his very best to keep the issue in proper, Biblical focus. His resolve to stay the course was a wise one. This seven-year struggle left its mark. The Norwegians pulled out of the St. Louis Seminary; several congregations left with Clausen's Big Canoe congregation; and there was a decided shift in the role of the laity in the Synod, laying the groundwork for greater activity on the part of the lay people in the church body(Rohne pp202-220).

This has been but a modest look at how different voices of Lutheranism spoke out on the issue of slavery. However, upon seeing how a number of church bodies in Lutheranism spent a great deal of time and effort on a crucial, an emotional, nevertheless secular issue, one cannot help but see all the more clearly the absolute necessity of keeping a church focused on the Word at all times. Where is the message of sin and grace when the pulpit talks only of disarmament in Europe? Where is the centrality of the cross when synod conventions discuss merely humanitarian aid to Third World countries? Yes, these concerns are serious. Yes, these

concerns are legitimate. But the lines must be drawn between the secular and the spiritual, between the governments in time and the Kingdom of Eternity. Secular concerns must remain just that. They must never threaten to displace the true purpose of the Church. The Holy Christian Church revolves around the Gospel. May it always be so with us.

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