

"THE CHICAGO THESES" REJECTED

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Church History

In 1915 to 1917 the midwest Lutherans made a major effort at Lutheran unity. This effort was carried out by the Wisconsin, Missouri, Ohio, and Iowa Synods. The result was the "St. Paul Thesis." It was a brief statement on conversion and election. All four synods responded favorably. However, the committees that represented the four synods were urged to continue their work. Joined later by the Buffalo Synod, these committees met for more than ten years. They produced periodic statements of proposed agreements which were examined by the various synodical bodies and then turned back to committees for further work. In 1928 the committee's work culminated in the "Chicago Theses," a series of doctrinal statements on which all committee members agreed, and which they then submitted to various bodies as a basis for the declaration of fellowship.

The Missouri Synod considered the Chicago Thesis at its 1929 convention. When the Intersynodical Committee presented their report, it asked that the Theses be considered separately from the question of fellowship.

The theses are before Synod for adoption or rejection. We consider the question whether the theses can be adopted to be distinct from the question whether we can enter into fraternal relations with the synods with which we have been conferring. The latter is at present excluded by the connections into which, sad to say, these synods have entered and the fraternal relations which they maintain with Lutherans who are not faithful to the confessions. The theses are a matter by themselves, and Synod ought to take action on them. 1

1 Proceedings of Thirty-Fourth Regular Convention, Ev. Luth Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States. p. 110

The reason church fellowship was mentioned was that the situation had changed from when the negotiations were first begun. The Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo Synods had been negotiating with the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America. It was clear that these three synods intended to associate with Lutherans who were not faithful to the confessions.

In reply to the Intersynodical Committee Report the examining committee of the Missouri Synod presented its report on the Chicago Theses to the Synod convention.

After careful examination of the revised theses of August, 1928, your Committee finds itself compelled to advise Synod to reject these theses as a possible basis for union with the synods of Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo, since all chapters and a number of paragraphs are inadequate. At times they do not touch upon the point of controversy; at times they are so phrased that both parties can find in them their own opinion; at times they incline more to the position of our opponents than to our own.

The revision made in St. Paul has not improved the theses. Although most of the exceptions made by your Committee touched upon vital points, the great majority of them were not considered. The chapter which suffered the greatest change by insertion of the declaration on "intuitu fidei finalis" is now less clear than it was before. Much in the theses is not sufficiently simple to be understood by laymen - an unconditional necessity in confessional theses.

The chief criticisms of your Committee are that in the "Short Presentation," etc., and under "C" the Scriptural doctrine of the universal will of grace is not clearly separated from the doctrine of election by grace. One gains the impression that election is included in the universal will of grace and concerns persons only in so far as it decrees that those shall enter heaven who, according to the fore-knowledge of God, already believe. Everywhere one misses the clear statement that in Christ

Jesus, God elected unto faith, unto sonship, unto perseverance, and unto salvation certain persons who are known to Him alone. We must furthermore criticize the fact that neither in the "Short Presentation," etc., nor under "A" the distinction between natural and malicious resistance was ruled out. At the end of "B" one misses the unqualified declaration that election is not the application of the universal will of grace to those who are saved, but something entirely different from the universal will of grace, to wit, a special act of God, consisting in the election of certain persons unto faith, unto sonship, unto perseverance, and unto salvation. The attempt, in the declaration concerning "intuitu fidei finalis," to distinguish clearly between election and a so-called decision of God to receive into heaven those who believe unto their end, has failed.

Most of the paragraphs under "D" are inadequate. They do not remove, but keep silence about, the old differences. We nowhere find a clear statement of the fact that the doctrines of the Church, the Ministry, Sunday, Chiliasm, and Antichrist are not open questions, but clear and well-defined doctrines of the Scriptures and our Confessions. - In the article on the Church a clear confession that the Church, in the true sense of the term, is invisible, was not made. The language enables the opponents to retain their old doctrine of a visible side of the Church. - In the statement regarding the spiritual priesthood and the doctrine of the ministry nothing is said of the doctrine of conveyance (Uebertragungslehre); neither is it clearly stated that every local congregation is the supreme and sole authority in calling a minister, independent of the clergy of the body to which it belongs. The paragraphs concerning Antichrist do not touch the old position of the opponents. The doctrine of Sunday is not presented; nor is there a statement to the effect that the false doctrine cannot be tolerated beside the true doctrine. The same thing is true of Chiliasm. It is not a Scriptural doctrine, but no opposition is raised to any one's holding it as a personal opinion.

Your Committee considers it a hopeless undertaking to make these theses unobjectionable from the view of pure doctrine. It would be better to discard them as a failure. It now seems to your Committee a matter of wisdom to desist from intersynodical conferences. By entering into a closer

relationship with the adherents of the Norwegian "Opgjoer", the opponents have given evidence that they do not hold our position in the doctrines of conversion and election. In view of this action further conferences would be useless and only create the impression as if we were endeavoring to come to an understanding, which is not the case.

It ought now also to be apparent that the manner of conducting these conferences, to wit, the exclusion of all historical matters, is wrong. As a result the opponents hardly understand each other.²

It is amazing that the Intersynodical Committee found nothing wrong with the theses and yet the Examining Committee said they should be rejected because of unacceptable statements. The question is asked, "Why the difference between the two committees?"

One possible answer was given by the President of the Ohio Synod in his report to the convention. In quoting one of the former Norwegian presidents, he questioned the attitude of the professors. Could there have been a conflict or a difference of position doctrinally between the men on the two different faculties? There appears to be a fault with this thesis. Prof. Theodore Engelder was a member of both committees. He was on the Examining Committee in 1926 when they reported to the convention that a number of changes would be necessary before the theses could be acceptable. At this time there was no minority report presented so that it can be assumed that Prof. Engelder was in agreement with the committee report. In 1929 he was a member of the Intersynodical Committee. Its report to the convention seems to show an acceptance of the theses and again there was no minority report. Again it must be assumed that Prof. Engelder accepted the report and agreed with it. That this theses might hold some truth is very possible, but it does not seem to have been the basic force which brought about the rejection of the theses.³

² Proceedings of Thirty-Fourth Regular Convention, Ev. Luth Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, P.110
³ Bunzel, C.F., "The Chicago Theses, 1964 p. 76-7

Could the Intersynodical Committee have been wrong?

In this case the Examining Committee would have been correct and synod would have made the right decision on the basis of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. However this would mean that some of the best theologians in synod had made a great error for such men as Theodore Graebner, William Arndt, Theodore Engelder, and George Mezger had apparently lined up in favor of accepting the theses. ⁴

If the Intersynodical Committee had made doctrinal errors; it surely would have shown up in the convention hearing or Synodical Conferences during the twenties. The Lutheran Witness would later say that "The Chicago Theses" were doctrinally correct on many of the doctrinal areas of which the Examining Committee had objected.

It has also been suggested that higher officials in the Missouri Synod were against the Theses. Prof. William Arndt's appointment of Prof. George Mezger as Missouri's representative in Germany and a member of the faculty at the Seminary in Germany did not sit well with those who were in favor of the Theses. The Intersynodical Committee was deprived of his presense when it could have been very influential. The appointment of Pastor Theodore Hanssen to the committee did not help the cause of the theses. He was part of a compromise that finally brought about its demise. And it even seems President Pfotenhauer was against the Theses according to a letter by J.T. Mueller.

⁴ Bunzel, C.F., "The Chicago Theses, 1964, p 77

In the end probably none of these are the overriding reason for Missouri Synod's rejections. The problem has to be in the difference among the two committees of the Missouri Synod.

The Intersynodical Committee representatives met with the men of the other synods. They had the opportunity to discuss doctrinal positions of both the men and the synods involved in the negotiations. Thus they were acquainted with the present, as of the 1920's, position held by the other synods concerning both doctrine and practice. The representatives could arrive at a mutual understanding of what was meant by the terms and wording that they used. The Intersynodical Committee worked from the present situation, not from what was believed a decade or generation before. But the Examining Committee did not have this privilege of direct contact with the other synods. Missouri's representatives on the Intersynodical Committee were always the middle men between synod and the other synods. Thus the mutual understanding probably never developed as it did with the committee members. The Examining Committee would therefore view the theses from the point of what they believed the other synods believed. If this was the case, as this writer believes it to have been, it then would have been a situation where honest doctrinally-sound theologians could present a set of theses to the Synod's convention in good faith, and yet have another group of honest doctrinally-sound theologians advise rejection of the same theses. Their error would then be a misunderstanding of the situation - a viewing of the present from the past. For support of this view, the reader need only recall that the 1929 Convention of the Missouri Synod asked that a committee be chosen to draw up a brief statement of the Scriptural doctrines taking into consideration all the historical data. 5

Missouri was the key factor in the rejection of the "Chicago Theses." The Buffalo Synod said they could

accept the Theses. The Iowa Synod was not too enthusiastic over it because of the section on Scripture was too strongly worded. The Ohio Synod dragged its feet waiting for an English translation. The N. E. S. C. of Iowa contributed a little influence on Missouri Synod's decision to reject the Theses when they sent Protest Memorial # 403 to the Missouri Convention floor.

The Northeast Special Conference of Iowa sent in a protest (Memorial 403) against the Intersynodical Theses as inadequate in many details and therefore unserviceable for purposes of union and requested Synod to reject the theses and to desist from further conferences. 6

Finally, Wisconsin Synod's reaction was basically one of acceptance at first. At the 1929 Convention Wisconsin Synod passed two resolves on the "Chicago Theses."

1. That Wisconsin was ready to deal with other synods in further discussions and
2. that conferences study the document produced so that the results of a ten-year effort in which Wisconsin had participated might be of benefit to many and not just to a few. 7

A representative in the "Chicago Theses" by the name of John Meyer best summoned up the Wisconsin response to the Theses in a reply to Hanssen's attack on the Theses.

The undersigned, as stated before, shares the responsibility for the formulation of the Chicago Theses, and it is not a pleasant thing to admit that they are unsatisfactory, or worse. But on rereading them after eight years since the last meeting has lapsed, I am forced in the interest of the truth to express my agreement with the above verdict of Rev. Hanssen ("Ambiguous and hazy...")

6 Proceedings of Thirty-Fourth Regular Convention
 7 Wisconsin Proceedings, 1929, pp86-87

it is possible to read into their wording either the doctrinal conception of the Synodical Conference or the opposing conception of the the ALC. And just for that reason they were and still are unacceptable to the synods of the Synodical Conference.") The subject matter of these theses having been thoroughly discussed in several meetings of the committee and the Scripture truths having been established in the discussions, the representatives of the Synodical Conference found these very truths expressed in the proposed theses. In the light of the satisfactory oral discussions they seemed to be plain statements of the truth and entirely universal. To an outsider, who did not take part in the discussions, however, the ambiguities that nevertheless crept into the phraseology are naturally more easy to detect. 8

The rejection of the "Chicago Theses" was sad indeed. In a sense the rejection marked the beginning of the end for this Synodical Conference. Never again in its history would the Synodical Conference be engaged in such a viable effort to enlarge its ranks in a God-pleasing agreement. Future efforts by the Missouri Synod for Lutheran unity didn't represent the conservative and the doctrinal position of the Synodical Conference. Eventually the Synodical Conference was dissolved.

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