

OVER 115 YEARS OF GRACE
(THE HISTORY OF ZION, READFIELD) W.V.

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BRUCE W. HANNEMAN

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*The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love. (Psalm 103:8).*

One doesn't have to study history to see the truth in the above passage, for this is clearly seen by the Christian in countless ways on a daily basis. Still, there are numerous times in a Christian's life that God's gracious dealings are overlooked. For example, in this prosperous twentieth century we sometimes feel deprived in spite of all God has blessed us with because we lack some things that others around us may have. At such a time we need to take a good look at what God has given us before that craving for what we lack turns into something uncontrollable. One of the best ways to do that is to focus our attention to years gone by, a time before the automobile and the electric dishwasher. Once we are reminded of how our ancestors lived and the hardships they endured we can't help but appreciate the many luxuries that make life so much bearable today. And then when we recall how we so often whine and complain that we don't have even more, we begin to appreciate God's compassion and grace, that He is slow to anger and abounding in love for sinful man.

As was stated above one doesn't need historical knowledge to see the truth expressed in this Psalm, however, some knowledge of how our ancestors lived will deepen our appreciation for it. Now lest someone get the notion that it was our ancestors who were deprived, this history of Zion will show that God was every bit as gracious in His dealings with our founding fathers and mothers as He is with us. Granted in regard to material wealth they lacked much compared to us, yet in ways that this present

generation may never learn to appreciate they were very blessed. One thing that was not different between the first families and us is that they, like we, were sinners. Sinners who knew Christ as their Savior from sin. Sinners who for various reasons left their churches and settled in places where there were no churches. Yet they did not forget about their God, nor did their God forget about them. God graciously sent men to them to preach His gospel and administer His sacraments and has continued to do so for more than 115 years.

IN THE BEGINNING

Zion, Readfield was organized in 1866 when fifteen German families in the area held a meeting under the direction of Pastor Theodore Jaekel to form a congregation. At this meeting the people agreed to apply for membership in the Wisconsin Synod and immediately made plans to build a church. They were officially recognized as a Wisconsin Synod congregation on June 22, 1867 at the synod convention. Now although this begins the official history of Zion, this is hardly the place to begin. The story of God's gracious dealings with the people in the Readfield area begins about ten years earlier.

The majority of the people that came to this area and settled here didn't come for religious reasons, in fact most came for purely economic reason. Some had even made the journey here to get away from the church. With the conditions in Germany the way they were we can hardly blame them. After the Reformation era, (shortly after Luther's death) just about everything in Germany went haywire. The economic conditions were poor, wars were breaking out, and there were numerous preachers claiming to be offering God's Word and yet few that were in agreement. Quite frankly the people were fed up with this so those that could afford passage and who had a sense for adventure traveled to America. By the early 1800's the East was fairly settled and many were traveling farther west. The State of Wisconsin

(then only a territory) attracted many German people because of the similar climate. As the first adventurers became settled they wrote back to their friends and relatives thus more and more made the trip. Those who came to Readfield were no exception. For the most part they came to Readfield because of the possibilities of quarrying limestone, also there was plenty of good farm land here. Another attraction to Readfield was that it was located along the stage route between Greenbay and Stevens Point which doubled as a mail route between Waupaca and the Neenah-Menasha area. Evidence that the people who settled this area did not come for religious purposes is clearly seen in that Readfield was populous enough to have its own post office by 1855, yet there were no congregations established in the area until 1863.

The fact that it took so long to establish a congregation was not because the people had forgotten God, rather it was because the conditions in Europe were so poor and they were confused. Now that they were removed from the preaching of this gospel and had a taste of what it is like to be without a church they began to experience a hunger for the gospel. God in His grace was not about to let them suffer from malnutrition!

In the year 1857 Pastor Gottlieb Fachtmann came to America and after landing in Milwaukee he located the president of the Wisconsin Synod, Pastor John Muehlhaeuser, and applied for a field of labor. His first assignment was to the towns of Richfield and Town Polk of Washington county. By the fall of that same year he was authorized (with the permission of his congregation) to undertake a mission journey. This seemed to be his divine calling and he did his job well. He was a bachelor who loved to travel and spread God's gospel. He began his journey north traveling on foot from Milwaukee to Calumet, from there he traveled to Fond du Lac, Oshkosh, Menasha and went as far north as Hortonville. In his early reports he notes that there were

some congregations already formed in the areas he traveled to whom some Missouri synod missionaries had preached, but these congregations were lacking any real unity and order. He also writes that wherever he went he found children that were unbaptized and older people who were hungry for the gospel and sacrament. (The people of Readfield may very well have been included among these.) Concerning the area around the Rat and Wolf rivers Fachtmann in a letter dated Sept. 1, 1858 wrote:

"By God's grace a large territory is being opened for our synod. The importance of the traveling missionary will become even greater in the next few years than it is now, for then the door will be open and the traveling missionary of the Wisconsin Synod will be a well-known person....It will be the duty of the synod to cast about for additional able workers to supply these localities."

And so it was that about the time the people in this area recognized how empty their lives were without the true preaching of the gospel and the administering of the sacraments, God sent missionary Fachtmann to fill this need.

Although Pastor Fachtmann had hoped that the Wisconsin Synod would be able to recruit enough men to do follow up work in all the areas he had covered, the synod was just too young to fill this need. However the synod was able to send a man to aid him in this area, that man was Carl Friedrich Waldt. Pastor Waldt had been a traveling missionary in Alsace Germany before he was persuaded to come to America by Pastor W. Streissguth of Milwaukee. He arrived in April 1859 and was sent by President Muehlhaeser to assist Fachtmann in the area north of Fond du Lac. Pastor Fachtmann transferred the entire northern part of his field to Pastor Waldt who then centrally located in the Neenah-Menasha area. It was Pastor Waldt who established the preaching stations on the Rat River (St. Peters) and Metzsig's corners (Zittau). In one of his reports to the synod he also writes about the eagerness with which the people in this area came to hear God's Word:

"In the vicinity of the Rat River is a peninsula where several farmers lived. There I was called for in a canoe made of a hollowed-out tree trunk. It was a shaky boat ride and I was glad each time to have firm ground under foot again. To some places I came only seldom and on weekdays, but these days were real festivals for the settlers. At some times it was necessary for men to carry their wives on their back through the marsh in order that they might attend services."

Other than 'shaky canoe rides' Pastor Waldt also did some traveling on foot along Indian trails, since most of the area west of Winchester was still virgin forest. As was implied in the above quote Pastor Waldt did not make frequent visits to this area, so to hold them over between visits the Christian families in this area began the practice of holding regular meetings in a log school house (located just west of the present site of St. Peters) and read sermons from a book. It was these families that founded the first church of what became a four church parish, (Zion became the fourth). On March 24, 1861 these families issued a formal call to Pastor Waldt and applied for membership in the Wisconsin Synod. Soon to follow their example was the congregation at Zittau which was accepted by synod officially June 17, 1862. Jointly these two congregations built a parsonage in hopes to have Pastor Waldt take up residence there, however due to the amount of work in the Neenah-Menasha area this was impracticable.

The fruits of faith of these people were not in vain for another man was sent to labor in this new parish. This man was Pastor Carl Wagner who was a brother-in-law to pastor Waldt and had accompanied him on the trip over from Germany, but had remained in Milwaukee serving as a teacher at St. Johns. Pastor Wagner became the first resident pastor in this area but did not limit his work to only the St. Peters and Immanuel (Zittau) congregations. He continued the mission work started by Fachtmann and Waldt making more frequent visits to those 'seldom visited' places. Among these was a group of people that had been meeting in a public schoolhouse just north of Readfield in the township of Caledonia. On March 14, 1863

this group of worshippers under the direction of Pastor Wagner organized a congregation and became known as St. Johns Church of Caledonia. They were officially accepted as a member of synod on May 30, 1863. Pastor Wagner continued to serve this triple parish until 1864 when he was called to serve a church in Racine county.

He was soon succeeded by Pastor Theodore Jaekel who had just arrived from Hirschberg, Schlesian. It was pastor Jaekel who directed the meeting in which the fifteen German families of Readfield decided to organize their own congregation which they called Zion of Readfield. The zeal of these families is clearly expressed in that soon after organizing they began plans to build their own church which was completed and dedicated to the Lord on Palm Sunday of the following year, and soon after they were officially recognized as a member of the Wisconsin Synod on June 22, 1867.

By this time in 1867 the areas around Readfield (including all four congregations) were well established both spiritually and economically. It is easy to see that God had not forsaken these people. He had sent to them men who taught His Word in all its truth and purity. Men who clung to the Lutheran confessions and ^{to} all the doctrines of the Bible. Men who by their dedication and sincere preaching of the Word had gained the confidence of these early settlers. God in His grace had removed these people from the chaotic conditions in Europe and led them to a place where His Word was once again preached in its truth and purity just as Luther had preached it, and His Grace continued!

Shortly after Zion became the fourth parish Pastor Jaekel was called to succeed Pastor Muehlhaeuser of Grace Lutheran in Milwaukee. However this parish was not left vacant for long. On August 24 of the same year Pastor August Wiese was called to serve this parish. Pastor Wiese was an ordained missionary of the Hermannsburger Mission in Africa and now had

come to Wisconsin and joined the synod. He seemed to be the appropriate man for the call for while pastor Jaekel was here he had extended the parish from four to seven congregations and one preaching station, (St. Peters, Immanuel, St. Johns, Zion, East Bloomfield, Weyauwega, Phillips Mill, and New London). Wiese's ministry in this area came to an abrupt end however, when while on his way to one of his congregations he was hailed down by one of his members who wanted him to visit her very sick husband. He willingly went only to find that the illness was a bad case of small pox. He stayed and ministered to the man and then went on his way. Two days later he died from the very same disease. He was not alone, many others also died from this epidemic. The whole area for months was placed under quarantine so that even the churches were forced to shut down. Yet in spite of this disaster, ^{the people} stood the test and expressed their faith in God to take care of them by continuing to pay Pastor Wiese's salary to Mrs. Wiese until the end of that year!

Pastor Wiese had served only two years and though his death came as a shock to many the people did not blame God for being unjust. Instead they called another pastor. He was Pastor John Meyer who had arrived in this country on Christmas eve 1870. He was sent by president of the synod John Bading to this area and was installed January 20, 1871. Pastor Meyer served the original four parishes regularly and from time to time visited a preaching station at East Bloomfield and crossed the Wolf river by ferry to serve congregations in Phillips mill and Weyauwega. Pastor Meyer stayed in this area until 1876 when he received a call to Caledonia of Racine county.

Pastor Meyer was succeeded by Pastor Christian Reichenbecher who was installed here on February 26, 1877. About the only thing out of the ordinary that occurred during his brief time here was that a matter concerning the building a new parsonage was settled between the four cong-

regations. Pastor Reichenbecher remained with these congregations until the Advent season of 1878, when he accepted a call to Bay View, Milwaukee county.

Once again the vacancy here was filled very soon when Pastor Carl Althof accepted this call and was installed on the Sunday after New Year 1879. It was at this time in the history of these congregations that they were faced with making a hard decision. By God's grace all but one chose God's Word over human reason. Perhaps this was because many remembered how rationalism had destroyed the Lutheran church of Europe, or perhaps due to constant exposure to the true Word of God that moved them to act in the way they did. What ever the case the fact that God was truly gracious to the people of Zion is clearly seen from what has happened in the liberal Lutheran synods today.

The problem that prompted a decision to be made was after Dr. C.F.W. Walther had delivered a paper to a certain district in the Missouri Synod about the doctrine of Election. Without going into too much detail, (this doctrine is one that is very difficult to explain) Walther's exposition was attacked by some members of the Ohio Synod (now ALC). The Wisconsin Synod sided with Walther because he had used sound exegesis and had interpreted the doctrine biblicly. [This is one of the Christian doctrines that our human reason finds hard to understand]. Pastor Althof sided with the Ohio Synod and tried to convince his congregations to go along with him. The only one that did was Immanuel of Zittau, (perhaps this had something to do with the fact that the parsonage was located there). Whatever the case the fact that the other three congregations sided with synod and rejected their own pastors efforts to have them side with him, shows that God was with these people in the making of this important decision.

Tha after effects of this move caused the three congregations to be separated for a period of ten years. St Peters was served by pastor

H. Kunkel who was an aged pastor that lived in the Winneconne area. He served them for about a year after which they were ministered to on a vacancy basis by the pastor of Van Dyne and Winneconne. Zion congregation was served on a vacancy basis by the pastor from Greenville, Pastor August Kleinhaus. Finally St Johns was served by the New London pastor, Pastor Albert Kluge. It was not an easy thing for these people to go against their pastor and to break relations with one of their sister congregations, but they knew that things would only get worse if they were to go against God's Word. The decisions to break relations were not made in haste, there were discussions and debates both on the local level and synod wide. The decisions involved many prayers requesting God's guidance. These prayers were answered when it became clear that Pastor Althof was not going to alter his rationalistic opinion. God guided the three congregations to seek out other pastors, ones that would teach them His Word without any additions and He made them readily available.

GROWING WITH GOD'S WORD

Around the year 1893 many parishes in this area took on the task of reorganizing, Zion was no exception. On March 27, the people of Zion decided that they had been served by a vacancy long enough. So they drew up a proposal to call a pastor of their own jointly with the congregation of St. Johns, Caledonia. And since neither of these churches had a parsonage they included this resolution:

"In the case that it is necessary to build a parsonage, money will be given here willingly by members of both congregations and the rest of the cost be divided equally among all members; that in case the two congregations would divide, the congregation on whose property the house stands would pay out the other congregations."

St Johns did not feel strong enough to enter into this proposal at this time so Zion went with a similar proposal to St. Peters, Winchester, (St. Peters already had a parsonage). They accepted this proposal and the cong-

regations jointly called Pastor Herman Gerhard who was installed into the dual parish on November 26, 1893. Shortly after this action St Johns voted to join this parish, they were accepted and once again it became a triple parish.

It was during this time that the lodge movement was becoming popular in America. Pastor ^{Gerhard} spent much of his time educating his people about the lodge, but he could not encourage them to make a definite statement against the lodge. The main reason for this was that the people were not directly affected by the lodge as of yet, and because of the occurrence only ten years prior they wanted to be sure of what God's Word had to say in this matter before they took a definite position. Pastor Gerhard served these congregations for three years and then accepted a call to Arcadia - Pleasant Valley.

The next person to serve this triple parish was a man fresh out of the Seminary by the name of Oswald Theobald. Pastor Theobald was ordained and installed into the triple parish on the seventh Sunday after Trinity 1896. He had come to America from Lodz Poland at the age of only 14 to study for the ministry, so after only serving here one year the people of the congregation allowed him some time off to visit his homeland. He not only visited there he also got married and returned to the parsonage in Winchester with a new bride November of 1897. It was during his ministry that one of the "secret organizations" was becoming popular in this area. The name of the lodge was called by the name of "the Modern Woodmen" and some of its members were trying to recruit some of Zion's members to join their organization. Thus this congregation found it necessary to define its position and did so in a revised constitution. The paragraph concerning the lodge reads as follows:

"All who desire to become members of this congregation are not allowed to be members of any secret order, or lodge, (whatever name they may bear). Should a person

ever affiliate with a Lodge of any kind, his membership with this congregation ceases."

For the second time in their history the people of Zion, Winchester, and Caledonia were compelled to spell out their doctrine and beliefs. For the second time they followed the principles spelled out in God's Word. It is plain to see that not only was God with them in making their decisions, but that He had also granted them the kind of faith that stands the test of temptation and willingly defends that on which it is based.

God continued to bless Zion in others ways too. By the year 1900 Zion had outgrown their church building and began to make plans to build another in 1901. The building was completed and dedicated to the Lord on November 9, 1902. Pastor Theobald continued to serve the people here for two years after this and then accepted a call to serve a congregation in Manchester, Wisconsin.

His successor was Pastor John Dowidat who had been serving a congregation at Jacksonport, Wisconsin. He was installed on the second Sunday of Advent 1904. These were rather quiet years for Zion and the other congregations, yet they were prosperous times. In 1908 St. Peters built a new addition their parsonage paid for entirely out of their own funds. In 1911 the members in the triple parish collected money and bought their pastor a new automobile, one of the first cars in this community. In 1913 St Johns built a new church which was dedicated December 14, 1913, and two years later they celebrated their 50th anniversary. In Zion the "Ladies Aid Society of the Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church of Readfield" was organized. A constitution was drawn up and recommended by Pastor Dowidat and was accepted by the ten ladies that founded this organization. In the following year a special service was held in celebration of Pastor Dowidat's 25th anniversary of his ordination into the ministry. This service held on Monday evening September 5, 1921 also served as a farewell to Pastor Dowidat who

had received and accepted a call to serve a congregation in Eldorado.

He was succeeded by pastor Ferdinand C. Weyland from Green Bay, who was installed here on November 13, 1921. Pastor Weyland served here during the difficult years of World War II and the depression. Although these were rough times Pastor Weyland made it quite clear that God had not withdrawn His grace from the people of Zion. He did this not only in his preaching but also by example. At the beginning of the depression in the year 1933 the synod had a problem of too many candidates for the work of the church and not enough places to send them, (due to lack of funds). Pastor Weyland tried to help out in this regard and August 6, 1933 Candidate Lewis Bleichwehl was installed to assist pastor Weyland in the parishes and to do mission work in the Ogdenburg area. Although he was never salaried by the congregations Pastor Weyland supported him out of his own pocket. His funds ran short in about a year's time and the mission endeavor to Ogdenburg had to be dropped. On April 2, 1934 a special meeting was called by the congregations to consider the need of calling an assistant pastor. Even though they would have liked to help Pastor Bleichwehl out the congregations decided that it would be impossible to support two pastors and they were forced to let him go. Pastor Weyland served here for over 23 years and while he was here he made many changes, one being that Church services were now held every week rather than every other week. Another was that more English services were held and were alternated with German services. By 1940 things were much better economically and the church of Zion purchased a new altar. Pastor Weyland served Zion until July of 1944 when he received a call to serve the Enterprise-Monico parish. He received a peaceful release from all three congregations and preached his last sermon here on September 3, 1944.

He was succeeded by Pastor Armin L. Engel who was serving a congregation

Berlin, Wisconsin before receiving the call to this triple parish. He was installed in all three congregations on October 29, 1944. Once again the Churches were experiencing an age of prosperity, but it did not come without some trouble. By 1945 the triple parish was having some difficulty sharing their pastor. Among other things the time schedule of services were a major issue. It finally got to the point that a mediator was called in to settle the issue. All finally agreed to rotate the services on an equitable basis. By 1946 the church of Zion was in need of repair this was done and the newly beautified church was rededicated to the Lord on March 23, 1947. In the following years the need for German services was on the decline and many were finding the constitutions (which had been written in German) obsolete, thus more English services were instituted and the constitution was revised and written in English. In 1952 Zion purchased a new organ and in the summer of 1953 the Ladies aid purchased chimes. The interior of Zion was remodeled in the winter of 1959-60. In this same year pastor Engel received a call to serve a congregation in Kendall, Wisconsin which he accepted.

He was succeeded by Pastor Edward F. Stelter. At the time the new pastor arrived plans had already been made for him to live in a new parsonage to be built in Readfield. When he first arrived he lived in a farmhouse just below the hill where the present parsonage is located. Pastor Stelter lived here for about three years until the dedication of the new parsonage on February 17, 1963. The year 1960 also marks the end of the congregation of St Johns who on voted to discontinue their congregation and to join Zion of Readfield. This became official January 1, 1961. Thus the parish was once again reduced to a dual parish. Not much happened during the years that Pastor Stelter served this parish other than building projects and purchasing things here and there for the church. It seemed that this long since established congregation was on the decline. It was a time when the

the people needed to be reminded of all God in His grace had given them with this congregation. God granted them this opportunity when they celebrated their centennial on June 18, 1967. Pastor Stelter continued to serve the people of Zion and Winchester until the Fall of 1968 when he received a call to serve a congregation in Two Rivers, Wi. which he accepted.

He was succeeded by Pastor John P. Brandt who had been serving a congregation in Faith, South Dakota. Pastor Brandt was installed in February of 1969 and is the present pastor. Again the only major events that have occurred in the past years of the congregation are remodeling projects and other small matters. When one walks into Zion today he will still enjoy hearing the Word of God that the first members of this congregation heard. Indeed the surrounding area will be much different. For one thing the church is much bigger, another is the soft carpeting and the padded pews. Yes Zion has come a long way from the time it was first established. And so today we may want to think back to those times and reflect on all the grace God has extended to us for more than 115 years.

This history reminds us that there were at least two times in the history of this congregation when the doctrines of the Bible needed to be defended. Our founding fathers did so by taking definite action against those who were presenting something contrary to Scripture. The courses of action they took have determined the kind of congregation Zion is today. It is not one of those wishy-washy congregations with no direction, but one that centers all it does on God's Word. May God continue to grant the present members of Zion the same kind of grace so that they too show the same kind of dedication to his Word ~~should~~ for the remaining years of this congregation!