

Gnadenwahlstreit at Oshkosh, Wisconsin -
The Schism of 1882

by John Hildebrant

Church History
Prof. Martin Westerhaus
8 May 1992

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 W. Seminary Drive, 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

In the year 1861, the state of Wisconsin was thirteen years old and only eight years had past since the founding of the city of Oshkosh. Ironically, the year that saw the beginning of America's bloodiest war also witnessed the founding of a congregation which, in twenty-one years, would be the site of one of the most messy battles in the Wisconsin Synod involving the Election Controversy.

After more than a year as a traveling preacher, the Rev. Karl Waldt was called to serve as pastor of the newly incorporated German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Oshkosh, Wisconsin on November 11, 1861. This congregation, commonly known as the Eighth Street Church, grew at a steady pace. In 1865, Pastor Waldt took a call to Nekimi, a township south of Oshkosh. He was replaced by Rev. Christian Stark. Pastor Stark served the Eighth Street Church until he resigned in May of 1870. The following month, the Rev. Phillip Brenner was installed. Pastor Brenner served the congregation faithfully for eleven years. Because of ill health, Pastor Brenner received a leave of absence during the summer of 1880. During the vacancy, Candidate of Theology Mr. W. Streisguth served the congregation. In August 1881, it became necessary for the pastor to resign. Until the post could be filled, another Candidate of Theology, Mr. C. Caroswitz, occupied the pulpit.

Enter our protagonist. As one layman recalled, "On October 8, our dear Dowidat came." (Wellnitz p.2) In November of 1881, the Reverend Christoph Dowidat was

installed as pastor of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church at Oshkosh. The following months were difficult for this thirty-eight year old leader, because of the Gnadenwahlstreit, or Election Controversy, which was raging through the various Lutheran synods of our country like a wildfire.

The origin of this controversy go back to the 1870's. In 1873, Dr. C. F. W. Walther began a series of essays, "The Doctrine of the Lutheran Church Alone Gives All Glory to God, an Irrefutable Proof That Its Doctrine Alone Is True." These essays were delivered to the Western District conventions of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. Part of this series included the doctrine of election. Suelflow points out that, "Walther presented these from 1877 to 1880 (addressing this subject earlier than called for in his outline), because of the extremely bitter controversy on this doctrine during those days" (p.183).

The heart of this controversy lay in the use of the latin dogmatical term intuitu fidei, that is, "in view of faith." In the years following Luther and the Formula of Concord, Lutheran dogmaticians used this term to describe God's election. In order to defend against the heresies of Calvin and Huber, one of whom denied universal grace and the other particular election, this term, "in view of faith," was utilized. Unfortunately, this term distorted the truth of Scripture, as Fredrich explains:

At best, the phrasing could be stretched to suggest the thought that God's electing in

eternity presupposed that all the elect would be brought to heaven on the pathway of faith. At worst, an election in view of faith could be thought of as being caused by the person's faith that God foresaw in eternity. This reading, which unfortunately many favored, could not but inject some human merit into a matter that the Bible presents as pure divine grace (p. 90-91).

Walther saw that the time to dispense with the term intuitu fidei was long overdue. Rather than election in view of faith, the proper Biblical explanation was given - election unto faith. This "new 'Missouri' doctrine" (Koehler p.158) was arguably neither new nor Missourian, but it was soon the focal point of the stir in the Wisconsin Synod and particularly in the congregation at Oshkosh.

From the 8th through the 15th of June 1882, the Wisconsin and Minnesota Synods met in joint sessions to discuss the doctrine of election. Pastor Dowidat attended the meeting which was held in La Crosse, Wisconsin. An additional delegate was sent from the Oshkosh congregation. His name was Mr. J. Gruber. Mr. Gruber was a former Missouri Synod member who had been a teacher at Oshkosh since 1875. In the course of that week, these two churchmen found themselves on opposite sides of the issue.

In the subsequent joint session that afternoon the Wisconsin and Minnesota men stood up to be counted on the issue. Those objecting to the previous doctrinal presentation on the Wisconsin side were Pastor J. Klindworth, of Galena Illinois, a recent acquisition from the Iowa Synod, Pastor C. Althoff of Winchester, Teacher J. Gruber of Oshkosh, and the Galena lay delegate (Fredrich p.93).

Pastor Dowidat, with the majority at the Synod convention,

went home to a minority in his own congregation.

Matters soon deteriorated at the old Eighth Street Church. One eyewitness said,

He [Dowidat] preached about election of grace. Then the people became angry. They did not want to hear about the new teaching. He had only preached 3 or 4 times, and then he was not allowed anymore. They drove us out and then they had a meeting. The pastor was not allowed to preach anymore (Wellnitz p.2-3).

The congregation was splintering. A minority party followed the pastor, while the majority insisted on the teaching of intuitu fidei. In order to reconcile their differences, a special committee was formed to look into the matter.

Finally it was decided to leave to a commission the question whether the new doctrine ought to be allowed to be preached in the church or, in other words, whether it was such a belief as would be proper to inculcate in the teachings of its pastor. This commission consisted of the pastor above named, Rev. Bading of Milwaukee, Prof. Graebner of Milwaukee, Prof. Schmidt of Madison and Rev. Allwardt of Lebanon, Dodge county. The last two were appointed by the church to represent its side and the others were chosen by the pastor. This commission met here on July 9th but the feeling was such, or for some other reason not explained, a majority of them declined to discuss the question or render a decision and the commission broke up without doing anything ("A Religious Row" p.7).

The presence of Professor Schmidt on the scene was not appreciated by those in the Wisconsin Synod. Both he and Allwardt were highly outspoken against the doctrine of election unto faith and actively supported the position of election in view of faith. Questions were raised about

whether or not Schmidt and Allwardt were really asked to come up by the congregation. It was also asked whether or not they had a right to be there since they were not members of the Wisconsin Synod and their membership in the Synodical Conference was also in doubt. The entire matter led to the refusal to seat Prof. Schmidt as a delegate at the October meeting of the Synodical Conference in Chicago.

Bading wrote to the President of the Norwegian Synod, H. Preuss, concerning the matter at Oshkosh and Prof. Schmidt's role. President Preuss, in turn, relayed a response from Prof. Schmidt himself.

- b. That the proceedings caused a split was on account of the pastor who refused to deal and as a false teacher is not fit to be a Lutheran pastor.
- c. When Bading alleged that Allwardt and I had left the Synodical Conference, Allwardt said that he was expelled from the Missouri Synod, whereas I stated that I still belonged to the Norwegian Synod and have been elected a delegate. That makes it incumbent on me to help brethren in faith. But I don't know whether I urged this thought at Oshkosh (Koehler p.160).

The decision to leave the Wisconsin Synod was reached and a meeting was called to make it official. At the meeting on July 23rd, things really got out of hand. "There was a big discussion at the meeting and things got so hot that the police had to be called to forcibly eject some of the members" ("A Religious Row" p.7). In the end, a tally was taken and the congregation voted to leave the Wisconsin Synod by a margin of 200 to 30. At the same meeting, Pastor Dowidat was officially dismissed as their pastor.

Throughout the following week there were flare-ups and

confrontations.

During the past week the wildest excitement has been raging among the more impetuous members of the factions. The two factions are the bitterest enemies. Fights have been going on all week and one man who is in a position to judge said he was afraid the end was not yet and that bloodshed would be the result ("A Religious Row" p.7).

Part of the continuing problem was the dispute over the church's property. Pastor Dowidat did not return his keys to the church, but continued to use the facility for gatherings of the minority party. Since his teaching was in line with the doctrine of the Wisconsin Synod, he felt that he and the minority party still represented the "regular and original society" ("A Religious Row" p.7) and were entitled to the property. The majority party, however, believed that their vote had carried the day. They claimed that the others had no right to retain or use the church building. Finally, legal action took place when the majority party decided to sue.

The papers in the injunction case are being prepared in Weisbrod & Harshaw's office. It seems Dowidat and his followers have held a secret meeting and elected new trustees,...It not being known exactly who were trustees of the Dowidat faction, several persons have been made co-defendants in the injunction suit in order to cover the trustees if possible. The defendants named in the injunctinal papers are Rev. Christian Dowidat, Gottfreid Horn, Gottfreid Menzel, Fred Schultz, Aug. Schimmel, Carl Boelter, Chris Pringel...The injunction was served on Rev. Dowidat and his party on Saturday night and at the same time, upon the advice of their attorneys the majority or anti-predestination party got access to the church building through the back way and posted a guard in the church which remained all night so that when church time should arrive on Sunday they could have actual

possession. About church time Sunday morning hundreds of people, anticipating that an attempt would be made to take the church by force, flocked to the scene but dispersed when it was seen that no trouble was likely to occur ("A Religious Row" p.7).

In the midst of all this turmoil, the reactions of three particular people drew special attention.

Mention has been made of two men, named Henry Gregar, not Krueger as has been published, and Fred Neitzel, going crazy over a religious excitement on the south side...The two who have already gone crazy were members of the faction that espouses the cause of Dowidat. There is one woman who has also gone crazy on the subject and is kept locked up in a room. Others are reported to be on the very verge of lunacy, wild as beasts of the desert and as untamed. Among the more ignorant these cases of lunacy are looked upon as a visitation from God, and this seems to create still greater consternation, and several cases of perfect desperation are reported. One man said the terrible mental excitement and abject condition of some of the people engaged in this furor was simply pitiful ("A Religious Row" p.7).

In response to these events, the following notice was listed in the religious column of the Oshkosh Daily Northwestern:

In view of the fact that three persons have gone crazy over the excitement in the German Lutheran Church on the south side, Rev. C. M. Heard, pastor of the Algoma Methodist Church preached a sermon on Sunday under the title, "Does Religion Make People Crazy?" (p.4)

Through all the commotion, Christianity received a black eye. Both factions involved lost their good reputation. Non-Christians especially found reason to ridicule and reject the truth. Perhaps it was said best by a member of the Dowidat group, "Whoever still had a little

bit of honor could not go home without tears" (Wellnitz p.2).

The minority, along with Pastor Dowidat, realized that they would not be able to keep possession of the church building. They arranged to use a local public school for their meetings and church was held there the following Sunday. Two weeks later, on August 13, 1882, the new congregation was formally organized. The name of the new congregation took on special significance.

As a living reminder that we are saved by grace alone, and that the congregation had been formed as a confession against any doctrine which would in any way limit the grace of God, the newly organized group chose the name, "German Evangelical Lutheran Grace Congregation." (Seventy-five Years of God's Grace, p.4)

The Lord blessed this small remnant in their endeavor to get off the ground. The Rev. Dowidat was called as pastor of the new congregation. Mr. Gruel was called as the teacher for a Christian day school. He had been the second teacher at the former congregation, but had not sided with Mr. Gruber in the controversy. Within a month, land was purchased, an architect was hired to draw up plans, and a contract was signed for \$4,320 to construct a new building. By October 1st the cornerstone was laid and only ten weeks later, on December 10th, the congregation moved into its new facility. Starting with little more than two dozen members in 1882, Grace congregation grew to over 800 by the turn of the century. Pastor Dowidat continued to serve the congregation until advancing years and difficulty with the

increased use of English prompted him to step down in 1921. The Lord called Pastor Dowidat home four years later at the age of eighty-two.

Meanwhile, the congregation known as the Eighth Street Church carried on as well. Immediately following the schism, the congregation secured the services of a Candidate of Theology, Mr. Karl Hemminghaus, until a permanent replacement for Pastor Dowidat could be found. The members voted to join the Joint Synod of Ohio and Other States and call a pastor from that church body. In October of 1882, the Reverend W. C. Lembke was installed as Pastor Dowidat's successor. Later, the advocates of intuitu fidei were joined by a dozen members from the north side Missouri Synod church. Rev. Daib served the Bowen Street congregation where there was a similar, though smaller, resistance to the doctrine of election.

In a 1954 conference paper, Rev. Otto Eckert of the Wisconsin Synod commented on the doctrine of election.

Unsoundness in this doctrine works like a vicious leaven and leads to loose thinking, indifference to other doctrines, lack of doctrinal discipline, lax practice, and unionism. It is a first step on the road to liberalism (p.76).

The subsequent history of the Eighth Street Church, now known as Peace Lutheran Church, vividly portrays such a process.

Membership in the Ohio Synod carried Peace Lutheran into the American Lutheran Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Along the way, women were given

the right to vote in congregational matters in 1937. A Boy Scout troop was establish within the congregation in the 1930's and 40's. Finally, in 1979 a woman vicar was installed as an intern at Peace Lutheran. In an Oshkosh Daily Northwestern article, Vicar Deborah Taylor was quoted as saying that the Psalms were her favorite portion of Scripture, "because the authors were so human and even cursed God sometimes" (Zorr p.2).

So, what has one hundred and ten years taught us? Was the schism at Oshkosh tumultuous? Yes. Was there blame on both sides? I think so. But, should it have happened? Most definitely. The election controversy was not the mere splitting of hairs. It dealt directly with salvation. The cost of the schism was high, but the cost of not standing up for the truth would have been higher. Pastor Eckert put it well when he said:

The fact that God from eternity knew how the individuals who are ultimately saved were going to deport themselves in time is no cause for their election and ultimate salvation. At this point we can only too easily be misled by our reason to draw what appears to be a very logical conclusion by saying that since the cause of man's damnation does not lie in the will of the eternal God but in man's nature and conduct, therefore thee ultimate cause of man's salvation and of man's election to salvation must also lie not in an eternal decree of God but in the nature and conduct of certain individuals in time. Thus we make eternity depend upon time and upon man himself by motivating God's eternal decree by something that man does or does not do in time, and in doing so, even in the slightest degree, we knock the SOLA [alone] out of the GRATIA [grace] and destroy the GRATIA itself (p.66-67).

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