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THE DANISH CONFESSION:
ITS EFFECT ON THE ALC/LCA MERGER

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The Word of God, is it inerrant? Does it mean what it says? Is it reliable in today's changing world? These are not recent questions, but questions that have been asked over and over again throughout the history of the Christian Church. I can remember as a young boy how my father went from one church to another one evening. He was talking with pastors trying to find one who could answer yes to the above questions. Since the answer Yes to those questions are important to me also, I was curious to see where my father had received his conservative training. Considering that my grandfather is full-blooded Dane, I figured that it must have grown out of the Danish Lutheran churches of his day. To my surprise I found out that my grandfather had actually been a member of the German church in Fremont, Nebraska. He had received most of his conservative training from German Lutheran pastors. These pastors were part of the old ALC which merged with the UELC, and the ELC. This fact only made me more curious about the confessional position of the Danes. I wondered what caused the split, and if that problem would be a problem for the merger coming up.

The split in the Danish Church ended up putting these two camps into opposite synods. The Danish Church went into the LCA, and the United Danish Lutheran Church went into the ALC. One of the major causes for the split of course, was the Word of God. Some strove for its authority and some strove against its authority.

The history of the beginnings of Danish Lutheranism in America is a whole paper of itself. Yet, some things must be mentioned to see how confessionalism won the day.

Danish Lutheranism actually had its beginnings in two places. The earliest actually had its beginnings in the Norwegian Lutheran Church. In the middle to late 1800's, the Danes were rich in immigrants, but poor in the number of pastors to serve them. The Norwegian Lutheran Church recognized this and intentionally set up programs to train Danish pastors, and to help them set themselves up in an indigenous church.

The efforts of the Norwegian Lutheran Church proved successful and a peaceful separation were its results. The Danes formed their own Association which remained in fellowship with the NLC. In September 1884 the Danish Lutheran Church Association in America was organized. It was called "the Association" by its own members, but it was generally referred to by others as the Blair Church because its educational institutions and its publishing house were located in Blair, Nebraska. I should also mention here that this church had many contacts with the Inner Mission movement in Denmark. This was a conservative, confessional movement that had its beginnings in the Church of Denmark.

The other Danish Lutheran beginning actually had its beginnings in Denmark. In 1867, a committee was formed in Denmark to provide religious leaders, both lay and clerical, for the Danes in America. The efforts of this committee brought about the organization of a small Danish Lutheran group in 1872. By 1878 this organization was reorganized as a church. It officially adopted the name, "The Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" (commonly known as the Danish Church). Two influential movements were represented within this newly organized synod. The two movements were called the Grundtvigian movement and the Inner Mission movement.

These two movements found peaceful co-existence within the Church of Denmark, but not in a democratic state of America. When you add unionism and conformity as external pressures the differences between the two became magnified, and the church quickly found itself in difficulty.

Although there were many polemical problems within this synod, there were two basic concepts maintained by the Grundtvigians that seemed to underlie most of the disturbance. The one had to do with human life and the world; and the other had to do with the Scriptures.

For N.F.S. Grundtvig, his grandson Frederik, and their followers, the source of the Christian life was the living witness of the historic community of believers (the Church). Since creeds, like the Apostle's Creed, are confessions that were transmitted from one generation to another, they were considered a living word of faith and the living word of God. For this reason, there was a tendency on the part of many of the Grundtvigians in America to be disturbed when the Bible was dogmatically referred to as the infallible and exclusive word of God.

In spite of these feelings they still valued the Bible highly in that it had grown out of the Church (as they saw it). Over the years this Grundtvigian view was largely abandoned. Yet, it was this idea that gave room for a rather liberal interpretation of the Scriptures. Later on they would strive to find unity with those who were like minded.

The other movement active in this new synod was the Inner Mission. The members of this movement were generally more pietistic and orthodox in their theology. The doctrinal position of the Inner Mission was

conservative and opposed to distinctive Grundtvigian emphasis. Strict standards of conduct, such as abstinence from common amusements, underscored the difference in behavior between believers and the unrepentant. The Inner Mission stressed lay as well as clerical responsibility for the work of the church and stimulated interest in youth activities, charitable work, and foreign missions.

The major and decisive conflict between these two movements came to a head at the synod's small seminary located at West Denmark in eastern Wisconsin. The conflict really got underway when the editor of the Dannevirke reprinted a lecture by a pastor in Denmark. In this lecture several references were cited in which the speaker made obvious his belief that the Bible could be studied in a critical (I assume a historical-critical method) manner. Professor Vig of this seminary attacked this position, saying that the Scriptures were treated in an irreverent manner. From that time on Vig sought to have the Scriptures characterized as the word of God and as the only rule and guide.

Professor Vig had an opponent at the seminary. Professor Helveg identified himself with the Grundtvigian distinction between the dead word of the written Scriptures and the living word of the Apostles' Creed, with priority given the latter. He realized that such a position would make it very difficult for him to function in the synod. The strained relationship between the two professors over their views of the Bible led to the closing of the seminary.

The doctrinal problems which caused the closing of the seminary, continued to trouble the church. In 1893 the synod found it necessary to

write a new constitution. This constitution was based on the Grundtvigian view of the Scriptures. The members were asked to sign the new constitution by February 15 1894, and were informed that those pastors and congregations who had not signed the constitution by that date would no longer be considered members of the church.

This action lead to the split of the Danish Church. The Inner Mission minority withdrew by refusing to sign the new constitution. In the fall of 1894 a new church body was organized by the Inner Mission minority. They adopted as its name the "Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church of North America (commonly called the North Church)."

This new synod found it had much in common with the Blair Church because of their connections to the Inner Mission movement. Within two years (1896) these two Danish Lutheran synods merged with one another to form the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The Grundtvigian Danish Church didn't do as well. It was reduced in size and never really recovered. The fact that its leaders disappeared didn't help matters. Grundtvig's grandson had died at an early age, and Professor Helveg returned to Denmark and spent the rest of his life there in Denmark. Most of the pastors sent over from Denmark didn't stay, but returned to Denmark. By 1960 it only had a total of 24,000 baptized members in 90 congregations served by 60 pastors. By 1963 it merged with the ULCA, Augustana, and Suomi synods to form the LCA, but never had any real contributions.

History has shown us how the Danish confession on the inerrancy of Scripture was so carefully protected by the Norwegian-Danish Conference, and the Danish church which formed out of that conference. Ever since the

Organization of the UELC a strong emphasis on good Lutheranism, and the need for a pious life were embraced. This was especially taught in their seminaries.

The theology of this synod was not very involved. The confessional statements of the churches were simple and brief. The Bible was accepted as the inspired Word of God, and no questions were asked as to the mode of inspiration. They simply took verbal inspiration for granted. A quick comparison of the confessions of the UELC's history show that there had been no change in the confession of the church since 1884, and this was to remain unchanged until the merger of 1960. The important confessions of the UELC from the 1929 translation of the constitution are given below:

Chapter II. Confession

1.

1. This synod believes, teaches, and confesses that the Holy Scripture (the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments) is the Word of God, revealed to mankind for his salvation. Therefore, recognizing the Holy Scripture as the supreme authority, it becomes imperative for all within this synod to submit thereto; and all our actions and deliberations must be governed thereby.
2. This synod endorses and subscribes to the Apostolic Creed as the ancient and common confession of the church.
3. This synod further endorses and subscribes to the other symbols accepted by the Church of Denmark, viz.,
 - (a) The Nicene and Athanasian Creeds;
 - (b) Luther's Small Catechism;
 - (c) The Unaltered Augsburg Confessionas the true expression of the doctrine which is according to godliness (1 Timothy 6:3), especially that basic principle "That a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Romans 3:28).

Here we see that the Danes were concerned about confessional Lutheranism.

They say some many fine things, but when you compare this to Article II -

Confession of Faith, in the WELS' Constitution, one sees a problem in the freedom allowed in the UELC's Constitution. Our Confession of Faith is listed below for comparison:

Section 1. The Synod accepts the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as the divinely inspired and inerrant Word of God and submits to this Word of God as the only infallible authority in all matters of doctrine, faith, and life.

Section 2. The Synod also accepts the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church embodied in the Book of Concord of 1580, not insofar as, but because they are a correct presentation and exposition of the pure doctrine of the Word of God.

The confessional position of the UELC was characterized by freedom. There were no pronounced theological writings beyond the previously mentioned confessions in its constitution. It was mentioned in dogmatics class that doctrinal controversies had a tendency to force a synod to reexamine the Scriptures on that doctrine and make it more Scripturally sound (sometimes this didn't make peace but divisions, but confessionalism usually resulted from one party or the other). There was no real conflict in the UELC, because it subscribed to the Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism, but in a relaxed and evangelical manner. For example, Jensen quoted one man as saying, "We never got embroiled in discussion about the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper. We simply communed."

The UELC did not have a strong central administration either. The freedoms and liberties given here were also carried over into the ALC, which helps explain its liberties and general falling away from true confessional Lutheranism. Yet, this was slow in coming. This synod still hung onto the idea of verbal inspiration of the Bible right into the forming of the ALC synod.

Now we can begin to ask ourselves, "What was the effect of the UELC's confession, on the merger attempts of the ALC and the LCA?" In the 1920's, the UELC found itself in fellowship with the Old ALC and the Norwegian Lutheran Church (now called the ELC). This was a time when unionism was strong. It seemed that many of the Lutheran synods were striving to be united with someone. In spite of this fever, the major issue of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible was not overlooked. In fact, this issue was a dividing factor which separated the Old Lutherans from the New-Lutherans of the ULCA. Again the Danes had a hand in this. In 1925, the non-ULCA synods convened a meeting to draw up a statement which the churches could adopt as a basis for fellowship and cooperation. Its decisions, the Minneapolis Theses, were designated as key points against the ULCA. By October 1930, all gave their endorsement and the American Lutheran Conference was established.

Nelson said that the purposes of the American Lutheran Conference were cooperation in those areas of worship, work, and witness. A prerequisite for this cooperation was a full unity of doctrine. This again left the ULCA out of fellowship.

In the late 30's and early 40's we see another attempt to include the ULCA in discussions of mergers. This mostly came from the Augustana synod. The conventions of 1940 revealed that the churches were quite aware of the persisting theological differences. The majority of the synods in the AL Conf. realized that the ULCA would never accept a fundamentalistic interpretation of inerrancy. With this in mind, the AL Conf. moved closer toward a merger with some of the more conservative synods within their

conference. This brought about the formation of the new American Lutheran Church in 1960.

In 1949 another attempt for union was pushed by the ULCA. Again they brought up the question that had disturbed American Lutheranism since the 20's and the 30's. "Does confessional unity require theological uniformity?" The ULCA said "NO", and the AL Conf. said "YES." Yet this time the ULCA argued more forcefully in favor of a Church with strong federative aspects. Again the UELC voice their objections for two reasons. The first reason was because of the laxity in practice within the ULCA, and the second reason was because there were evidences that the ULCA seminaries were teaching views on Scripture that were contrary to what had been held by the UELC for almost 100 years. It had remained loyal to its confessional interpretation of the gospel. In so doing it pointed out the theological differences. These differences divided the synods into camps, and kept them divided.

Unfortunately this is about where the story ends for the UELC, and their confession. After the merger of the American Lutheran Conference the UELC began to disappear. It fell victim to the Americanization process. The confession of inerrancy was called just an interpretation of that time. There still remains a minority of Lutheran pastors in the ALC who strive to hold on to this confession, yet, the LCA is calling all the shots. The minority is made up of the pastors from the Association of Free Lutherans. To my surprize the Danes had little or no constituency. One can only hope that a few have kept tract of their heritage and their confession. The proof will be shown in 1988 when the two synods merge under the terms of the LCA. In other words, the Danish confession will have little or no effect on the merger.

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