

THE CHICAGO THESES TEACH US THAT
ONLY GOD ESTABLISHES TRUE UNITY

senior church history
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The "Chicago Theses" or "Intersynodical Theses" began with what John Philipp Koehler calls the "Minnesota Intersynodical Movement." In Sibley County Minnesota Pastor H. Boettcher of the Wisconsin Synod and Pastor C. G. Seltz of the Missouri Synod after devoting themselves to a joint study of the doctrines of Election and Conversion and the discussion of them in the recent Election controversy began to interest their fellow pastors in the area in a new attempt to find a true union among the synods. This about the year 1915.

After a while, the other Synodical Conference pastors of the county and also the Ohio Synod men of the area adopted a short series of theses drafted by Seltz and a Ohio man named H. W. Krull. By May of 1916, St. Paul had become the headquarters for this movement and in a meeting on the 3rd and 4th of that month 555 men of six different synods signed "Leitsaetze zur Einigung." These were probably the same as the Seltz-Krull theses of the previous year.

At this St. Paul meeting two special committees were appointed. These consisted of men from the Minnesota, Ohio, Iowa, Missouri, and Wisconsin Synods. Their chief function was to obtain signers. The signatures obtained according to Synods were as follows: Iowa 170, Missouri 161, Minnesota 81, Ohio 66, Wisconsin 47, Michigan 16, Nebraska 3, Evangelical Synod in Minnesota 1. The area most interested extended from North Wisconsin through Minnesota to the Dakotas and from Nebraska and Iowa in the south to Canada in the north.

It is interesting to note that the invitation to the St. Paul meeting had been issued to pastors only and that some professors of theology felt slighted. Dr. H. Ernst of the Ohio Synod practical seminary stated, "I am a theologian, but not a pastor", and left the meeting. At our Wawatosa seminary Koehler reports there was some of the same and alludes that some said Boettcher should be disciplined for apparently acting beyond the limits of his office.

Koehler, of course, defends Boettcher. "It really goes without saying that Boettcher and his associates did not intend to slight and disrespect the advice of the professors; they thought that the project stood a better chance of moving along if the pastors felt free and could talk freely among themselves, without professors to monopolize the floor: not mentioning at all that the project could have divine blessing without the presence of professors. Besides, the professors had less freedom of movement for such conferences."

At any rate an intersynodical committee was appointed in 1917 to which President Bergemann appointed Director Schaller and Prof. Herm. Meyer of the Wauwatosa faculty. They were replaced by Professors Koehler and J. Meyer in 1919. President Hoessel and Pastor Lange represented the Buffalo Synod, Pastor Ermisch and Prof. G. Tritschel the Iowa Synod, Prof. Metzger of St. Louis and Pastors Kleinhans and Hohenstein, the Missouri Synod, President Hein, Pastor Pflueger, and Professors Schmidt and Ahl of Luther Seminary, St. Paul, the Ohio Synod. The other

Wisconsin Synod representatives were Pastors Haase, Boettcher, Wm. Sauer, and Lehninger.

Koehler recounts the meetings he was involved in at the lakeside suburban hotel north of Chicago where they took place and hence the name "Chicago Theses." Of interest to us is that President Hein and his associates in the Ohio Synod and the men from Iowa readily agreed to the positions of the men from Wisconsin. An example would be the discussion of the phrase "in gleicher Schuld." Hein had objected to the "equal" in the phrase though he had no doubts about the guilt. In Hein's distinction the Christian would be credited with some merit through his faith in justification and election. Koehler correctly contended that the Scriptures strictly discredit such a view and that the matter is simply a "mystery" in the Greek sense of the word, that is, something wonderful, sublime, and sacred.

Other matters discussed at these meetings were the expression "almighty grace," a discussion that adopted the principal that all argumentation was to be based solely on the Scriptures and Confessions that Koehler felt came from Prof. Metzger of St. Louis, (Our Wauwatosa men contended, however, that in order to restore unity everything must go back to the Scriptures and not to 1580 or the Confessions), and a discussion between Koehler and Prof. Graebner of St. Louis, who had replace Metzger, on the "Institution of the Office of the Ministry." (Graebner interpreted this to be the local pastorate)

At any rate, it seems Hein and the other members of this intersynodical committee reached agreement and finished their work in August of 1928. However, the participating Synods never reached unanimous agreement concerning the theses. The Iowa and Buffalo Synods did adopt them in 1928 but the Missouri Synod rejected them and the Wisconsin Synod as a result failed even to act upon them.

The Missouri Synod rejected them according to Prof. I. Habeck of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary because, one, they felt them not to be clear on the "Intuitu Fidei" and secondly, because they felt an "antithese" was lacking. This seems to be justified since the last paragraph of the section on this phrase simply states, "Accordingly, the only way to establish peace, in the Church is for all to accustom themselves to speak as the Scriptures and the Confessions speak."

It is further understandable in light of the fact that Missouri had just recently gone through the Election Controversy with some of these same people and was hesitant to adopt theses until they were substantiated in practice. It is not surprising then that the Missouri Synod in 1929 resolved not to accept the Chicago Theses for the following reasons: "a) because many serious objections have been raised by members of synod which in our opinion should be carefully considered and eventually be taken into account in any further work concerning the theses; b) because the omission of all historical data in working out the theses was evidently nonconclusive to a full understanding on the part

of the colloquents." We must begin with the Status controversiae." The Missouri Synod did not, however, inform the Intersynodical Committee and the synods, not even the Synodical Conference brethren before they took this public action.

It is too bad that Missouri rejected the Chicago Theses in this manner, but I feel they were justified in doing so from the position they were in at that time in their history. I believe the reasons listed above and the subsequent actions of the Iowa, Buffalo, and Ohio Synods in 1930 in the forming of the old American Lutheran Church bear this out.

I do not agree with Koehler that the history of these theses is merely another example of the kind of "feeling" that resulted in his leaving our seminary during what he would call a comparative situation. I am referring to the supposed conflict between the professors on one hand and the pastors on the other in the development of the Chicago Theses.

It is unfortunate that the two great points of agreement reached by the Intersynodical Committee, namely, that Holy Scripture alone is the right source of all our knowledge and understanding in every respect, and faith, in the true sense of the word "pistis" with everything that flows from it through the operation of the Holy Ghost, is the only effective factor in teaching, learning, and intercourse, especially in the endeavors to restore unity, did not serve to bring about a true unity between the synods involved.

That this work presented the Synodical Conference with its last opportunity to act as the forum for efforts toward a true

unity among Lutherans in America is evident from the way that since that time the American Lutheran Church has acted in that capacity. This is indeed sad for the ALC acts from entirely different motives than those espoused by the writers of the Chicago Theses. Chiefly to be learned from the Chicago Theses is that men do not establish unity, only God does that.