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CLASS: HISTORICAL THEOLOGY; CHURCH HISTORY 373
LUTHERANISM IN AMERICA

TITLE: THE CHICAGO THESES: PROMISED MUCH, PRODUCED
LITTLE!

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1972

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
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Imagine the joy President Nixon would have if he could get the representatives of the North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong, and the South Vietnamese to agree to his terms for peace. Then imagine the despair and disgust President Nixon would have if they would then leave the Paris peace talks and each go their own way, his apparent victory a realistic defeat.

To many true followers of confessional Lutheranism the Intersynodical (Chicago) Theses must have produced these same results, first a feeling of joy and accomplishment and then a feeling of sadness and emptiness.

Over ten years of work went into the Chicago theses and when the work was finished in August of 1928 it appeared as if the impossible had been accomplished. But when in 1929 only the insignificant Buffalo Synod formally adopted these Theses those who had such high hopes for what the Chicago Theses might accomplish fell off of cloud nine and landed on the ground, and came to, in the land of reality.

To fully understand why many felt that the Chicago Theses had accomplished the impossible, before the truth became apparent in 1929, we must go back to the beginning of the Synodical Conference in 1872.

The Synodical Conference had only a few years of peace. The state-synods strife began around 1876 and shortly thereafter the election controversy developed over which the Ohio synod withdrew in 1881.

The Ecumenical movement was as strong if not stronger

in the later part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century as it is now in the seventies. There was however one difference between the ecumenical movement of the early twentieth century and the ecumenical movement of our day and age. In our day and age doctrinal differences have little to do with keeping church bodies apart. Seventy years ago church fellowship would have been impossible without complete doctrinal agreement. This does not mean that the Lutheran theologians who lived around 1900 were less enthusiastic about church unity than their counterparts of the seventies. Their principles concerning Biblical doctrines and agreement therewith were simply stronger.

And so with the departure of the Ohio Synod from the Synodical conference the ecumenical movement seemed to be going in reverse rather than forward. It wasn't until about 1915 that the intersynodical movement seemed to shift into first gear again and out of reverse. Pastors Boettcher and Seltz of the Wisconsin Synod devoted themselves to a study of the doctrines of election and conversion. Eventually they got the Ohio men of the neighborhood interested as well as the Iowa synod. Before it was over 15 states were involved as well as eight synods. If it wouldn't have been for the 'personality' conflict between the pastors and professors much probably could have been accomplished.

From this intersynodical movement in Minnesota the

Intersynodical Committee was appointed. In 1917 President Bergemann appointed Director Schaller and Prof. Herman Meyer to the committee as the representatives of the Wisconsin Synod. Within two years both these men died and Prof. John Meyer and Prof. John Philipp Koehler were their successors. The Ohio, Iowa, Buffalo, and Missouri Synods were also represented by some of their top officials.

Fortunately before anything else these men agreed to use Scripture and the Confessions as the only basis for all argumentation. This, of course, did not solve all of their problems as is quite obvious from the length of their deliberations before a final theses was drawn up. It wasn't until August of 1928 that their work was finished.

To be sure, when the Chicago Theses came out in 1928, many could not believe their eyes, for the Chicago Theses covered all of the points at issue among the church bodies involved for seventy years, and because all of the representatives from all five synods signed the Theses it was 'safe' to conclude that after all of these years a merger of the majority of the Lutherans in America was close at hand.

What was even more astonishing was the fact that all of the doctrines involved in the Chicago Thesis were scripturally sound. When you read the list of doctrines involved in the Chicago theses Scriptural agreement among these five church bodies would simply seem unbelievable. Take a look for yourself and tell me if you would have thought that these five church bodies could have ever

agreed, and agreed scripturally, on the following doctrines; Conversion, Universal will of grace, The Election of grace or of God's Predestination unto the adoption of children and unto Salvation, The Scriptures, Our positions as regards the Lutheran Confessions, Church-Fellowship, The Church, The Spiritual Priesthood, The Pastoral Office, The Antichrist, Chialism, Sunday, and Open Questions. Unbelievable isn't it?!

Apparently, and I emphasize the word apparently, things looked good for the ecumenical movement and for Lutheranism in general. But behind the scenes things weren't so rosy.

As I stated earlier only the insignificant Buffalo Synod adopted the Chicago Theses. What caused the others to let this last opportunity to bring American Lutheranism together under the sound doctrines of the Bible is a sad story, a real sad story.

While all this was going on the Ohio synod and the Iowa Synod were meeting in Minneapolis with the Evangelical Lutheran Church. In 1925 the Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo synods adopted the "Minneapolis theses" as common ground on which to build closer affiliation with the ELC. In fact in 1928 the Ohio Synod established altar and pulpit fellowship with the ELC. Because the ELC was not in doctrinal agreement with many of the doctrines in the Chicago Theses these decisions by the Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo Synods caused much concern among the officials of the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods.

It was beginning to become quite obvious that at least Ohio, if not also the other two, were two faced, and as the Indians would say spoke with a forked tongue. It was also quite apparent by 1929 that these three Synods were about to merge and form a new Synod.

The Missouri Synod resolved in 1929 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.¹ In short Missouri was upset with the actions of Ohio up in Minneapolis as well as the apparent merger of Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo for this deadly hurt their hopes of bringing these three Synods into the Synodical Conference. Missouri also was upset that the previous heretical doctrines of Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo were not specifically pointed out in the Chicago Theses. They felt that it was necessary for everyone to see that they were admitting their false heretical views and adopting the Biblical doctrines of Missouri. Though the Theses did have an antitheses in both the sections on conversion and election the heretical positions of the other three synods during the past years were not specifically pointed out to Missouri's satisfaction.

The Wisconsin Synod's reasons for not taking action on the Chicago Theses is probably the most sad case of them all.

In the first place Wisconsin had gotten into the habit of following in Missouri's footsteps, at least it appeared to be that way.

The Wisconsin Synod was also at this time going through one of the most difficult and heated conflicts in its own midsts that any Lutheran Synod in America has ever gone through. The intra-synodical gutachten trouble came to a head in 1929 and this split the faculty at the Thiensville Seminary as well as the Synod itself and because of this disastrous inner conflict Wisconsin had little time as well as little concern for the Chicago Theses and its possible effect on American Lutheranism.

How these five synods could let ten years of hard and fruitful work go down the drain is really a question only those who were personally involved and in the position to take action can really answer. Those who were in such a position will all have to answer for their actions to God on Judgement Day. To be sure many will be able to give an account of themselves with a clear conscience but then again many will not.

Certainly a rare and valuable opportunity slipped by without accomplishing what it apparently could have accomplished. Hitler failed to learn from Napoleon's mistake and invaded Russia during the winter and thus set into motion his own downfall. If and when another

opportunity like the Chicago Theses presents itself again
I sincerely pray that those involved do not let the opportunity
slip through their fingers.

Indeed, the Chicago Theses promised much and produced
little but we all know that what happened was best for
the Church of Christ.

ENDNOTES

1. The Norwegian Lutheran Sentinel, August 1943, p. 245

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