Grundtvigianism and Danes in America

By Thorvald Hansen

In 1867 Claus L. Clausen, a Dane who was active among the Norwegian immigrants, was in Denmark where he urged consideration for the spiritual lives of the Danish immigrants. As a result of his visit a commission for the preaching of the Gospel among the immigrants was formed. This commission, better known as »Udvalget« sent a pastor and two laymen to investigate conditions in 1871. The laymen, A.S. Nielsen and Rasmus Andersen, were later ordained and had a long and distinguished record of service in the Danish Lutheran Church in America. The leader of the group, Pastor A.L.C. Grove-Rasmussen travelled as far west as Grand Island, Nebraska. In the course of his journey he met with many people and came to the conclusion that there was a need for spiritual service to his countrymen. He was convinced, however, that the Danish pastors who came should remain completely independent of any other church organization in America. He discovered that there was a great emphasis on the Bible as the only source of Christian faith, life and doctrine. He wrote, »Scarcely any pastor in the Danish Church would be able to subscribe to such a statement in all honesty.«[1] He further found that though they knew almost nothing of Grundtvig, there was a Grundtvig phobia (en Grundtvigianer-skræk) in America which would make it difficult for the Danes. It is the origins of this Grundtvig phobia about which I first want to say something. Then I will move on to the schism or split in the Danish Church in America which occurred in 1894 and which resulted in there being two Danish Lutheran Church bodies. One had its roots in the Inner Mission (Indre Mission) and the other in Grundtvig - though it must be added that not all who belonged to it were Grundtvigians.

Grundtvig phobia (Grundtvigianer-skræk)

Grundtvigianism, in at least one form, came to America long before there was a Danish Church. It came by way of Norway. The name Grundtvig was well known to the Norwegians who had been impressed by his early struggles against rationalism. Later a pastor named Wilhelm Andreas Wexels became an exponent of Grundtvig's

teaching, particularly with regard to the basis of the faith and the confession of faith. Wexels was active in Norway for many years and Grundtvigianism in Norway became known as Wexels' teaching (Wexels' Lære). The Dane, Claus L. Clausen, who had been ordained in America by a German Lutheran pastor in 1843, and had heard Grundtvig preach many times, also spoke favorably of Grundtvig. But he was not alone in his admiration for Grundtvig.

One of the early arrivals among the Norwegians was J.W.C. Dietrichson, who had been ordained by a bishop in Norway. He served a number of scattered preaching places and he sought to organize them and prepare a constitution for the group in eastern Wisconsin. That constitution referred to doctrine as revealed »...in God's holy word through our baptismal covenant as well as in the canonical books of the Old and the New Testaments.«[2] The same Dietrichson sought to form a synod on this basis in 1849. A similar, but more successful attempt was made in 1851. That constitution was adopted in January and the congregations were to act on it by May. However, they appear to have failed to do so. The failure was not due to any concern with the doctrinal statement, but the laity was concerned that the constitution gave too much influence to the pastors. Clausen continued to serve as superintendent of the church body. He was, in effect, Bishop, but without that title.

Meanwhile, the theological climate was beginning to change in Norway. Three new pastors arrived in America in 1851. They had been under the tutelage of professors whose teachings were shaped by Lutheran Confessionalism as expounded by the Germans. At least one of the three came with the determination to root out the Grundtvigian influence. Thus, at the very next convention, in February of 1852, the offending phrase »in our baptismal covenant« was eliminated. All except Clausen voted to eliminate the phrase.

The point of all this is that what became the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America came very close to embracing Grundtvigianism as its doctrinal basis. The action taken in 1852, however, meant a definite rejection of Grundtvig and the acceptance of a more orthodox position. And, during the next twenty years opposition to Grundtvig grew to such an extent that in 1871 Grove-Rasmussen could speak of a Grundtvig phobia (Grundtvigianer-skræk) in America. Thus, Danish pastors were in trouble from the very

beginning of the Church Mission Society (Kirkelig Missionforening) which by 1874 had become the Danish Lutheran Church in America.

Opposition - word and deed

That the theological climate was not favorable for Grundtvigianism in America was made manifest in many ways during the years prior to the establishment of the Danish Church. The Scandinavian Synods were merciless in their condemnation of Grundtvig. One F.L. Mathiasen, of Milwaukee, who describes himself as a Grundtvigian and who says he would prefer to have a pastor of that persuasion, indicates that they would have many difficulties to overcome. Speaking of these Scandinavian synods, he writes:

> Despite the fact that they are mutually antagonistic, they would certainly be united in condemning the Grundtvigian pastors as heretics and would place all possible obstacles in their way and that, considering the conditions here, they could most emphatically do.[3]

Clausen comments on this by saying that he knows the Grundtvigian pastors are among the most competent, zealous and gifted in Denmark, but he goes on to say, »I believe that, all things considered, they will do better to remain in Denmark than to come here.«[4]

Another layman, J.C. Paulsen, of Luck, Wisconsin wrote to Adam Dan in 1872, when Dan was already under the fire of the Norwegians. He wrote that he had observed strife among the Norwegian pastors for nine years. Significantly, he added:

> I had a suspicion that it would be a bitter struggle when the friends of the 'churchly view' (i.e. the Grundtvigians) stepped forth openly. ...amid the many confused voices with their great scriptural principle, crying to high heaven regarding their monopoly on Lutheranism. It was into this already highly charged atmosphere that the Danish pastors came and the sparks began to fly almost at once. The pastors who came in 1871 and later were by no means all Grundtvigians. Indeed, the majority were not, but this made no difference to their opponents. To

them, being a Danish pastor was synonymous with being a Grundtvigian.[5]

The opposition to the Danish pastors was first directed against Adam Dan, the pastor in Racine, Wisconsin. Dan, who was hardly as Grundtvigian, but who was not opposed to Grundtvig, came to America from the Holy Land in 1871. He was ordained by Johannes Müller-Eggen, a Norwegian pastor whom he replaced in Racine. In a matter of a few months, however, Müller-Eggen became convinced that Dan was a heretic and he persuaded four of the members of the congregation at Racine to file suit against Dan and gain possession of the property. In his desire to prove Dan a heretic, his lawyer contacted the Missouri Lutheran Theological Seminary at St. Louis. It is ironic that the Missouri Lutherans were contacted because the Norwegian-Danish Conference of which Müller-Eggen was the secretary, had no use for the Missourians. Nevertheless, the professors at St. Louis did respond and they unanimously declared Dan to be unlutheran and a heretic. Their reply concluded with these words,

»May such gross heresy and apostacy from our pure Lutheran doctrine never attain circulation among our Scandinavian brothers, but by all lawful and scriptural means be driven out and exterminated.«[6]

The lawsuit was decided on December 12, 1874.

»Adam Dan was found guilty of preaching false doctrine; but the party adhering to him being in the majority, the court gave them the property and the original name of the congregation.«[7]

This was not Müller-Eggen's only attempt to interfere with the Danish mission. The Norwegian-Danish Conference had been formed in 1870 with Müller-Eggen as secretary. As such he approached J.A. Heiberg, a Danish pastor in Chicago, with the suggestion that he could have the supervision of the Danish churches in the Conference. There was a condition attached, however. It was that Heiberg should undergo an examination and be approved by the Conference as a true believer. Heiberg declined, saying that he was too busy serving his own congregation and then he added, »It makes no difference to me

whether you or your group approves of me as a true Lutheran believer because I have been examined, and sent out by the mother church in Denmark.«[8]

Müller-Eggen also turned away any suggestion of cooperation with the Danes. Pastor Rasmus Andersen, who was far from being a Grundtvigian, had some correspondence with Müller-Eggen in which he suggested that they could still work together toward a common goal. Never one to mince words, Müller-Egean wrote in reply, »When you speak of working together Andersen, I regret that you could even dream of such a thing...«[9]

The opposition to the Danes was by no means confined to words or even to lawsuits. Time and again, in various places the Danish pastors faced difficulties placed in their way by the Norwegians and their sympathizers. The newly ordained Pastor Søholm in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, wrote in 1873 that he had to put up with a great deal from the Norwegian pastor. In other places Danish pastors faced difficulties in assembling a group for worship even though the group was desirous of such. Pastor K. C. Bodholdt, of Nebraska once assembled his congregation for worship only to find that the schoolhouse which they planned to use had been locked by the opposition and he was refused the key. Knowing that permission had been granted by the proper authorities, Bodholdt and his people broke the lock and entered. Thus, in one place after another, the Danes found roadblocks placed in their way by those who opposed them.

Other Factors

The Danish Church like an umbrella, provided shelter for many of varying opinions. There were followers of Grundtvig in the group, but there were also pietists, those who placed an emphasis on Lutheran doctrine and some who favored a bishop dominated church. I suppose one can simplify and say that it was a liberal, all inclusive group. This type of church was not well received in America during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. American churches tended to be more pietistic and dogmatic. The late emminent immigration historian, Marcus Lee Hansen, has characterized American church of that period as being influenced by what he called, »spontaneous

immigrant puritanism.« By this he meant to suggest that the immigrant churches quickly learned to adjust to the prevailing trends and to adapt a puritanical stance with respect to the society around it. He tells of one immigrant church in a community that was seen as being too lax in the matter of discipline. Before long the pastor seized upon an opportunity to bodily remove an unrepentant drunk from the service. The pastor was found guilty of violating the man's rights, but the important thing to note is that never again was the Lutheran Church in the community looked upon as being too lax.

Another problem, especially acute in the immigrant church, was that of leadership. The leaders often felt that their authority was threatened by changes and developments, both internal and external. Of this one writer has said, »It was the peculiar plight of the immigrant church to possess a threatened leadership, which lay at the heart of the pervasive church turmoil. Threatened leaders labored feverishly to centralize authority, revitalize faith, and maintain the loyalty of their flocks...«[10]

Finally, differences within and among the immigrant churches were very common. The Danish case was by no means an exception. By 1875, for example, there were five different Norwegian church bodies. John Bodnar, writing in 1985, said, »No institution in immigrant America has exhibited more discord and division than the church.«[11]

There can be little question but that what happened during the early period had a profound bearing upon the life of the Danish Church. It is enough to say that the early problems continued and that they were later compounded by internal dissention. Nevertheless, during the period between 1872 and 1884 the Danish Church made progress. Only three pastors, three congregations and a number of preaching places constituted the Church Mission Society in 1872. In 1874 the name was changed to the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In 1878 the Church wrote and accepted its first constitution, and a privately owned folk school was begun. Two years later the school became the property of the Church. In 1878 also, the idea of having a bishop was rejected. By 1884, Kirkelig Samler, the church paper which was begun in 1872, could report that there were now 31 pastors, 114 congregations and preaching places and that 13 of the congregations sponsored parochial schools.[12]

The Danish Church - internal divisions

The year 1884 marked a kind of watershed for the Danish Church. The existence of the Norwegian-Danish Conference was really a thorn in the flesh of the Danish Church. In that year the Danes in the Conference decided to withdraw. The withdrawal was peaceable. More Danes had come to America by that time and the Norwegians agreed that the Danes should go it alone. The Danes who withdrew from the conference were invited to join the Danish Church. It was reported that they would do this only on the condition that the Danish Church accept the Bible as the word of God. This the Danish Church could not do and remain true to its own tradition. There is also reason to believe that the Danes who withdrew from the Conference did not seriously entertain the idea of joining the Danish Church. In fact they sent a representative to Denmark to seek aid from the Inner Mission, but this they did not receive. In spite of this failure to receive help, they did organize a new group at a meeting in Argo, Nebraska on September 12, 1884. They chose to call themselves the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church Association. In that year also they established a seminary at Blair, Nebraska, a seminary which formed the nucleus of what later became Dana College. It became known as the Blair Synod. Thus, from 1884 onward, there were two Danish Churches among the immigrants in America. This fact gave new impetus to the latent divisions within the Danish Church and the next ten years were to be critical in the life of that body.

The first major crisis in the life of the Danish Church revolved around the seminary. The beginning was peaceable enough. After much discussion and voting, a site was finally selected at West Denmark, near Luck, Wisconsin which is some seventy-five miles (ca. 120 km) northeast of Minneapolis. There was no difficulty in selecting a leader for the seminary. It was generally agreed the president of the seminary should be Pastor Thorvald Helveg, who had been trained at the University in Copenhagen and who was thoroughly competent. He was to serve as head of the seminary and as pastor of the church at West Denmark. He was to be aided by Pastor Jens Pedersen, who was pastor of the North Luck congregation, some two miles (a little more than three km) north of the seminary. Things went well enough the first year, but then Pedersen moved to another congregation. He was replaced by P. Sørensen Vig. This was a

deliberate choice of the convention because Vig was a non-Grundtvigian and this would bring to the seminary instruction from the Inner Mission as well as the Grundtvigian perspective.

Helveg and Vig got off to a good start, but it was not long before differences appeared with the result that they were not in agreement on such things as the status of the Bible and whether or not the seminary was representative of Lutheranism. The disagreement between the two instructors reached a point where it was difficult for them to continue even though they remained personal friends. Others, by comments and writings in the weekly, Dannevirke, which was an unofficial church paper, added fuel to the fire. The result was that the convention in 1891 decided to discontinue the seminary at the end of the school year in 1892. Despite valiant efforts to save the situation, the seminary was actually discontinued that year. In the five years the seminary had operated, 18 students had been prepared for the ministry, but once again the church had to rely entirely on the training school for pastors established at Askov Folk School in Denmark. It was not until the seminary at Grand View College began to function in 1897 that the church once again had a seminary. The first graduate from that school entered the ministry in 1901.

Meanwhile there were other points of friction within the Danish Church. The matter of the attitude toward secret societies was one of these. The son of N.F.S. Grundtvig, Frederik Lange Grundtvig, had come to America in 1883. He had met Thorvald Helveg and through his encouragement and instruction, Grundtvig had become a pastor in the church at Clinton, Iowa. Grundtvig was adamantly opposed to secret societies and especially to the Danish Brotherhood. While many, if not most agreed with his position, there were some who did not and thus it became a point of friction. So, too, did the matter of starting Danish colonies. There were many who wanted to found new colonies where Danes could settle, the language and culture could be preserved, and the church could establish a congregation. Many enthusiastically supported this idea, but there was also a good deal of opposition. The opponents felt that establishing colonies and preserving language and culture did not fall within the province of the church.

Probably the most significant issue was the founding of the Danish People's Society (Dansk Folkesamfund) by F.L. Grundtvig and a number of others. The aim of the group was the preservation of the

Danish language and culture. At first there were many who endorsed this idea and became members of the group. However, complaints began to be registered. Some complained about Grundtvig personally, maintaining that he had written to congregational board members to secure members for the Society and that in so doing he had by-passed or neglected the pastor. A more common complaint was that the new Society would be in competition with the church. As the complaints grew a number of those who had previously joined the society withdrew their membership. This included a number of pastors. To his credit, Grundtvig offered to use his influence in dissolving the Danish People's Society, but a vote of the membership did not agree and the Society continued. In fact it was not until as late as 1964, when there were less than a dozen members left, that the group was finally dissolved.

Church Divided

There were then a number of disagreements within the Danish Church. The existence of a more pious group did not help any. Neither did the launching of a new Danish paper, Danskeren, by a leading member of that group in 1892. *Danskeren* was intended to permit members of the more pious minded to find a greater voice within the Danish immigrant community. It was their belief that the pages of *Dannevirke* were not as open to them as to members of the Danish Church, it should be emphasized that neither was the official paper of the church body, but they were, nevertheless a voice for the group. Those two papers played a decisive role in the dispute. Had it not been for the often heated polemics in the papers it might have been possible to resolve the differences more easily. In fact, time and again, when it seemed that things were going forward on a more even keel, an article written by one or other of the partisans would rock the boat anew.

The dispute came to a head within the Danish Church in 1893. A special convention was called for February of that year in an attempt to bring peace within a tormented body. To that end a new constitution was adopted. The most significant change referred to the Church's stand on the Bible. Now a paragraph in that constitution read:

> The holy Scriptures, the canonical books of both the Old and New Testaments, are in fervent agreement with the Christian faith and we, therefore, accept them as God's word to the Church as containing wisdom unto salvation for the fellowship of believers and as such it [the Bible] is our book for enlightment and inspiration based on the faith.[13]

Another and perhaps even more significant addition to a new constitution was the statement that, »No one who desires a more narrow or more broad foundation than the one we have laid can be a member of our church.«[14]

The constitution, with these and other changes, was adopted by a vote of seventy-seven to seven. It was then voted that the new constitution should be effective immediately.

This seemed to clear the air, but unfavorable reaction was not long in coming. It was disclosed that P. Sørensen Vig had not voted for the constitution because he saw it as not making a place for the symbolic books and, therefore, not being Lutheran. This set off a new firestorm of debate in *Dannevirke* and *Danskeren.* Finally, at the urging of the Commission in Denmark (Udvalget) a special convention was called for September of 1893. Among the complaints had been one that the new constitution was not legal in that advance notice had not been given, that changes in the constitution were to be considered at the meeting. At the special meeting in September it was therefore decided to take up the constitution item by item. As a result some of the offending items were eliminated and the entire document then unanimously accepted.

Then came a motion that set the stage for the split in the Church. It was voted that any pastor or congregation who did not sign the new constitution within a certain time was no longer considered to be a member of the Danish Church. It was determined that the time would expire on February 15, 1894. Just why this condition, which excluded non-signers, was adopted is not clear though it probably was a well intended effort to clarify just who was a member of the Church. Neither is it very clear why all of those who voted to accept the document would not sign it. In any case this touched off a new debate as to whether pastors and congregations should sign or not. To make a long story short, 18 pastors were lost to the Church. Out of 119 congregations, 40 signed the constitution. However, the loss

in this case is more confused than clear because all of the congregations had not been duly organized. Some were only unorganized preaching places and as such could not be considered congregations lost. In any case, the Danish Church did lose a sizeable portion of its membership. It did, however, attain peace within its ranks. The next convention of the church was the most peaceful in years.

Conclusion - since then

Meanwhile, those who had refused to sign quickly formed the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America - the so-called North Church. Thus, for a brief period, there were three Danish Lutheran Churches. This came to end 1896, when the North Church merged with the Danish Lutheran Church Association (the Blair Church) to form the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church. Since then that Church and the Danish Church have cooperated in some things. They published an English language hymnal together and there was some cooperation in mission work. Each did have its own college, the United Church having Dana College and the Danish Church, after 1896 had Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa. As a result of mergers, first in the 1960's, and later in the 1980's, the two churches are now together. It should be noted however, that it was the Lutherans and not the Danes who got together.

Noter

[1] A.L.C. Grove-Rasmussen, *Rejseberetning,* Odense, 1871, p. 34.

[2] E. Clifford Nelson and Eugene L. Fevold, *The Lutheran Church Among the Norwegian-Americans*, Minneapolis, 1960, p. 115.

[3] F.L. Mathiasen, letter cited in Rasmus Andersen, *Pastor Claus Laurits Clausen*, Blazir, Nebraska, 1921, p. 150.

[4] Claus L. Clausen, Ibid., p. 151.

[5] J.C. Paulsen, letter cited in P. Sørensen Vig, *Dansk Luthersk Mission i Amerika i Tiden før 1884,* Blair, Nebraska, 1917, p. 82.

[6] Synoden for den Norsk-Evangelisk-Lutherske Kirke i Amerika, *Evangelisk Luthersk Kirketidende*, I bind, nummer 32, 1874, p. 490.

[7] *History of Racine and Kenosha Counties*, cited in P.S. Vig, *Op. cit.*, p. 84.

[8] Kirkelig Missionsforening, *Kirkelig Samler*, Oktober 1873, p. 23.

[9] Johannes Müller-Eggen, letter to Rasmus Andersen, November 28, 1872.

[10] John Bodnar, *The Transplanted, A History of Immigrants in Urban America*, Bloomington, Indiana, 1985, p. 167.

[11] Ibid., p. 166.8

[12] *Kirkelig Samler*, 3. Marts 1885, p. 120f.

[13] *Kirkelig Samler*, 16. Marts 1893, p. 119.

[14] Ibid., p. 120.