

FREEDOM AND CHRISTIAN EDUCATION



1869 - 1944

Diamond Anniversary

AUGSBURG COLLEGE AND THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

(In the fall of 1944, Augsburg College and Seminary celebrated its 75th Anniversary. It was a week-long affair, filled with noted LFC speakers as well as Conrad Bergendoff, President of Augustana College and Theological Seminary, Rock Island, Illinois. Several dignitaries presented greetings at the homecoming banquet including President of the University of Minnesota, W. C. Coffey; Dean of the Graduate School of the U of M, Theodore Blegen; Reidar Solum, Royal Norwegian Consul representing the Norwegian Government (in exile in London because of WWII German occupation of Norway), and several others. Most of the addresses, sermons and greetings were printed in a seventy-seven-page booklet entitled "Freedom and Christian Education."

One of the chapel speakers during the week was Dr. John Stensvaag, who had graduated from Augsburg Seminary in 1939, received a PhD from Hartford Seminary (1941), and was currently back at his alma mater teaching in the seminary. His sermon is printed below and reflects a tone somewhat different from the others in the booklet. Most were giving lip service to the founders and were looking forward to the great things coming in the future. Stensvaag, on the other hand, looks back to the founders, but focuses on what their beliefs were—especially those of Georg Sverdrup, the powerful voice of Augsburg Seminary that also spawned the Lutheran Free Church. Note how Stensvaag intertwines the beliefs of Sverdrup with Augsburg and the LFC and poses a question: In the midst of all this celebration, do we still hold to the beliefs of our founders? I have underlined three paragraphs beginning on page 3 that are pretty much the gist of what he believes were the beliefs of the original LFC. —LOD)

Are We Hypocrites?

John M. Stensvaag

Assistant Professor of Old Testament, Augsburg Seminary

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, Hypocrites! For ye build the sepulchers of the prophets and decorate the tombs of the righteous, and say: 'If we had been in the days of our fathers, we should not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.'" Matthew 25:29-30.

The religious leaders of Christ's day expressed great admiration for the prophets of the past. They honored their memory and saw to it that a portion of their writings was read in the synagogue each Sabbath. They loved to be called the disciples of Moses, and held that their own religion was in full accord with the religion of the prophets.

But in this they deceived themselves. In reality their religion was a far cry from that of the prophets. This is clearly seen from their violent opposition to John, a man who came to them in the spirit of the old prophets, and from their bitter hatred of Jesus, the Messiah in whose coming the prophets rejoiced. In our text Christ mercilessly

exposes their hypocrisy. He points out that for all their praise of the prophets, they were not a whit better than the men who put them to death.

In these days we at Augsburg honor the founders of our school. We quote from their writings and pay tribute to their accomplishments. This is commendable; it is as it should be. Nevertheless, we need to be reminded of the Pharisees, for there is always a possibility that our praises, too, may be hypocritical. We may be honoring past leaders while in reality rejecting their teachings. Yes, it may even be that if we who today decorate their tombs were actually confronted with the men themselves, we would cease our praise and speedily join their old enemies in casting stones at them.

This may seem far-fetched, but we can be sure that the Pharisees thought the same of the words of Christ. And yet they were true. The trouble was that the Pharisees took for granted that all was well and were not aware of the cleavage which had arisen between them and the men they honored. This should be a warning to us – a warning to examine ourselves to see whether we are really in tune with our founding fathers. This does not mean agreement with them in every particular – in the course of time there must necessarily be inner development and external change both in religious life and in the sphere of education. But it does mean agreement with them in the matters which they considered fundamental, or, to put it differently, that we be one with them in spirit.

In the midst of our festivities, it would be well, therefore, that we check our praise while we search our hearts and make sure that we are not guilty of hypocrisy. As an aid to such self-examination, let us recall some of the basic convictions of our founders. In the first place, Christianity was to them intensely personal. Religion is ever in danger of becoming external and impersonal. This was the case in Norway when Hans Nielsen Hauge, toward the close of the eighteenth century stirred the people by his evangelistic preaching. As he stressed the necessity of a personal experience of salvation, a mighty revival swept over the land. “And,” in the words of Georg Sverdrup, “to this end Augsburg was built, that the Norwegian awakening might have free course. . . . in the new land.” Consequently, our fathers placed great emphasis on the need of conversion, of an individual experience of sin and grace. How is it with us? Are we of one mind with our founders, or does such talk make us feel uncomfortable? Have we come to have an aversion for emotional experiences, desiring instead a sedate and formal Christianity? If so, we cannot in sincerity honor the memory of the dead.

Our founders stood for simplicity in religion. Church history reveals that Christianity is constantly in danger of becoming secularized, confounding spiritual things with earthly, and glorying in costly cathedrals, elaborate rituals, impressive numbers, powerful organizations, and outward show. Against this tendency the founders of Augsburg strongly reacted. They sought to follow Him who said: “Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the son of man hath not where to lay his head.” And for this reason, the greatest simplicity marked their public worship, social functions, and private living. They put their confidence in the Holy Spirit not in things external. How is it with us? Are we living a simple religious life, or is ours a sophisticated, college type Christianity? Do we prefer pomp and show to simplicity,

and fawn upon the great of this world? Do we confuse bigness with greatness and put our trust in organizations and techniques? If so, we have forsaken the ways of our fathers and have forgotten what Christ so often stressed, that only the truly humble are in favor with God.

The founders of Augsburg believed in expressive Christianity. In spite of the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers, there is an ever-present tendency to fix a gulf between pastors and people. This gulf is evidenced in the notion that all public preaching, praying, and witnessing ought to be done by the pastors. Our founders were ridiculed and denounced because they rejected this view and taught that all believers were to be witnesses of Christ and workers in His vineyard. They insisted that all the gifts of grace, including the gift of lay preaching, must be ferreted out and put to use. Are we of the same spirit? Or have we permitted the old gulf to arise once more, in practice confining the spiritual work of the congregation to the pastor? Do we frown upon testimony meetings and give no room for lay preaching? Do we limit lay activity to the barest minimum instead of encouraging it to the greatest extent? Then we are not the true sons of our founders, and the honor we show them today is but empty lip service.

In the thinking of our fathers, Christianity was central. Christ was the hub about which all else revolved. It was so in their private living, and it was so at Augsburg. Religion was to them not a department among other departments. No, it was the heart and soul of true human life. In comparison with the knowledge of Christ all other knowledge was of little significance, and secular learning acquired true value only to the extent that it was related to Christ and His kingdom. The primary aim of our founders was to save souls and to kindle in the saved a burning desire to save others. Are we of the same conviction? Or has Christianity come to have a secondary importance for us at Augsburg? Has it been pushed into the background by curriculum, credits, and culture? Have we relegated it to some corner of our life? If so, we are not of one mind with our founders who were first and foremost disciples of Jesus Christ.

Here, then, sketched in broad lines, we have the religious ideals of the founders of Augsburg. They stood for a personal, simple, and expressive Christianity which to them was the center of all living and the measure of all things. And now as we honor their memory at this Diamond Jubilee, let us examine our own hearts and let us ask ourselves in all sincerity: Are we one with them in spirit? If we are not, it would be better not to build sepulchres and decorate their tombs either as individuals or as a school. For to do so would be hypocrisy. But God grant that at this milestone in the history of Augsburg, we may be able to re-affirm our devotion to the high ideals of our fathers. God grant that we may rejoice in the great spiritual heritage of our school and that we may resolve by the grace of God to carry forward the work in the same spirit as our founders. For then we shall be true to our calling and receive praise from God.