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An Excerpt on Slavery from "Synodical Proceedings"

Translated by: Christian J. Einertson

Translator's Preface

Looking back on the impact and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. the issue of civil rights for minority communities obviously comes to the fore. Historically, King's work for civil rights is inextricably linked with the Civil War and surrounding events such as the ratification of the thirteenth through fifteenth amendments a century before his time. In an attempt to engage the issue of civil rights theologically, I present a translation of the report on the debate over slavery from the proceedings of the Norwegian Synod's convention in July 1861 as it is found in *Kirkelig Maanedstidende* v.6, 258–262.¹

An Excerpt on Slavery from "Synodical Proceedings"

The Norwegian immigrants who would make up the Norwegian Synod came to America in a time when the issue of slavery was central in American political discourse. The Synod was founded in 1853, and in light of the secession of the southern states and ensuing Civil War, slavery quickly became a crucial matter for them to address. Yet the Synod was bitterly divided on this issue. Having immigrated to northern states and learned of the American institution of chattel slavery as absolutely abhorrent to their sensibilities, the majority of the laity were understandably abolitionist and expected their churches to advocate publicly for the abolition of slavery. The majority of the clergy, however, held a more nuanced view of the issue of slavery, seeking to distinguish between the institution of slavery itself and the abuses of American chattel slavery. This position was influenced by C. F. W. Walther and his colleagues at Concordia College in St. Louis, where the Norwegian Synod had been sending their seminarians for theological education since 1859.²

Indeed, the relationship with the Missouri Synod was in a certain sense the impetus for the slavery conflict in the Norwegian Synod. Professor Laur. Larsen, the Norwegian instructor at Concordia College from 1859 to 1861, was asked on multiple occasions to state publicly his position on slavery and the position of the seminary faculty. Larsen shared Walther's more nuanced view of slavery and eventually reluctantly responded to the requests by publishing an article in *Emigranten* explaining his position. His article met strong opposition, however, and as a result of the very public debate surrounding Larsen, the issue of slavery was debated at the subsequent synodical convention in 1861. The convention was

contentious, and the minutes presented below in translation record two conflicting resolutions: one stating that slavery was not in itself sinful that was supported largely by the clergy and another calling slavery inherently sinful that was largely supported by the laity. For a detailed and helpful treatment of the slavery debate in the Norwegian Synod, I recommend Theodore Blegen's *Norwegian Migration to America*,³ which devotes an entire chapter to the topic.

The report of the slavery debate from the 1861 convention is notable for multiple reasons. First, the bitter conflict that can be seen in the proceedings is indicative of a broader conflict within all of Lutheranism in America at that time, where various synods ran the gamut from staunchly abolitionist to entirely supportive of slavery.⁴ Second, the position and arguments of Larsen and the pastors reflect and were influenced by those of Walther and thus shed light on the historical relationship between the Norwegian Synod and the Missouri Synod.⁵ Additionally, many of the issues discussed at the synodical convention in relation to the issue of slavery remain relevant to other issues of civil rights both in King's day and to the present day. I prayerfully submit this translation in hope that a consideration of its contents will lead Christians today to a more informed understanding of how our fathers in the faith have engaged issues of civil rights theologically and how we can continue to do so today. Finally, I would like to dedicate this translation to the memory of my great-grandfather, the Rev. Arthur Gustavus Baalson, whose background in the Norwegian Synod and work as a Norwegian Lutheran pastor in America inspired my research on the Norwegian Synod.

Slavery

Professor Larsen and many of the other pastors showed from the Scriptures that slavery is not a sin. 1 Timothy 6:1–2 was especially developed, where it says, "Let all who are bound under a yoke hold their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the God's name and the teaching will not be blasphemed." Slaves should therefore not only obey and honor their masters but even hold them as worthy of all honor, and the opposite, says the Apostle, would blaspheme God's name and teaching.

And in the second verse it says that those slaves who have believing masters should not despise them because they are brothers but serve them even more gladly [*desto hellere*] because those who receive their good deeds are believing and beloved. The Apostle could not possibly say that such masters were believing and beloved if it were a sin in itself [*Synd i sig selv*] to own slaves or if it were a necessary result of their faith to set their slaves free as soon as these became Christians, for the Apostle is speaking here to believing slaves. "Teach and exhort this," he says finally, and then he persists in verses 3–4 [original: 34]: "If someone teaches otherwise or does not stay close to our Lord Jesus's true word, he is puffed up, etc." In the Old Testament, it is taught in many places that God not only allowed slavery but also in some cases

commanded it through the Law (e.g. Ex 21:1–7). When there was a commandment that a master should set a Hebrew slave free in the seventh year, it is not possible to conclude therefore that also now every slave owner should set a slave free after seven years. For this belongs to the Jewish political and governmental law, which is not binding for us. God has evidently often tolerated many sins in the Old Testament for the sake of hardness of heart; however, he has never commanded something that is a sin in itself. Thus, he tolerated polygamy and gave rules for it; however, he has never commanded that a woman should become a man's plural wife. It was impossible, for this is a sin in itself. However, he has commanded that one should be sold as a slave in some cases. And slavery is indeed only a particular form, although certainly the hardest form, of a servant relationship.

Erik Ellessen opposed this evidence and expressed that personal freedom was not only the highest good but also a right that no one could deprive the other, but as we should nevertheless support our neighbor unconditionally, if it was in our power, so a Christian master must be obliged to set his slaves free according to love of neighbor, for you shall love your neighbor as yourself. He expressed that in 1 Timothy 6:1, the Apostle only wished to exhort slaves to obedience and patience, that they should find themselves calm in their station, but that it was also the obligation of masters to set them free when they became Christians and thus ready [*modne*, lit. mature] for freedom.

From the other side, it was noticed that freedom is certainly a good, indeed the highest temporal good, but even so only a temporal good that can and must be done without when God does not give it. However, it was not a right that we had by nature. We have no rights: “we have brought nothing into the world,” “but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these” (1 Tm 6:7–8). Furthermore, we are all by nature slaves of sin and have as our punishment earned all need [*Nød*] and misery, both in time and in eternity. Accordingly, we have nothing to claim as a right but must be thankful for what God gives us, though it were rather humble in the eyes of human haughtiness. The circumstance in which God sets us is his good, gracious gift to us; if he in his wisdom is pleased to set us in a humble, destitute station [*Stand*], then it is yet grace, and the only thing that God claimed with his leading [*med sine Førelser*] is that we could obtain the Christian freedom in faith by being set free by Jesus Christ and thus God's slaves. With regard to this, it is perfectly indifferent if in my external circumstance I am slave or free, rich or poor, of high or humble station. “Let each one remain in the call to which he is called,” it says. “Are you called as a slave, then do not worry about it” (this is accordingly indifferent for the Christian life); “but if you can also become free, then take the opportunity gladly,” says the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 7:20–21. For freedom is a good such as money or property; if God allows us to obtain it, it is well; if not, do not worry about it. The Apostle in 1 Timothy 6 says nothing at all about masters setting their slaves

free. That is taught nowhere in Scripture, nor does it follow from the word “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Then, it must likewise become an obligation for a property owner to divide [*dele*] his property with his hired workers, and for the rich one to divide it evenly with the poor. But the commandment does not command that we shall do to our neighbor just as we do to ourselves but that we shall think of ourselves in his place and do to him what we could rightly [*med Billighed*] wish and expect that he would do for us if we were in his place. Thus, a slave can rightly expect that his master will treat him dearly and mildly, teach him Christianity, and thus make him one set free in Jesus Christ, and this is also truly the master’s obligation according to the commandment of love. However, whether the master wishes to give him external freedom, if he is suitable for it, must be a free matter as all acts of mercy, just as it is a free act of mercy if a farmer wishes to divide his farm with a faithful servant. No one could make such a thing a necessary obligation for another. But although slavery was not a sin in itself, it was granted nevertheless that it was an evil [*Onde*] from which many dreadful sins and abominations easily resulted, and even more truly often followed. Therefore, when such a master sells a man apart from his wife or vice versa, that is absolutely a sin in itself, for that is to separate what God has united. Likewise, when a slave does not get to learn God’s word. One must condemn all such abuse, just as one must recognize that slavery was a result of sin. In the same way poverty, sickness, and all need in the world are results of sin, but it is not therefore a sin in itself to be poor or sick.

Many of the Synod’s pastors declared that they could very well excuse that not everyone could apprehend this immediately, for they themselves must confess that, before they had closely examined the matter according to God’s word, they had believed that slavery was a sin in itself, especially from reading or hearing of so many disgraceful, ungodly acts that often resulted from it. But when they had tested the matter according to God’s word, they had to confess that it was not a sin in itself but rather an evil, and not mostly for slaves but often perhaps at a higher level for the masters, for it easily remained a temptation for them to haughtiness and arbitrariness [*Vilkaarlighed*] of all sorts.

Many wished to treat slavery thus, as it is found here in real life, but to this it was responded that this was a historic or political question, which did not belong here, as there existed challenging historical considerations, such as familiarity with the laws here in the United States and reliable knowledge of the abuses that are alleged to take place. However, it was

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“but if we have food and clothing,
we will be content with these”
(1 Tm 6:7–8).

necessary for each one to admit that wherever one noticed such an abuse and, for example, asked, "Is it a sin to mistreat a slave? Or to sell a man apart from his wife? Or to keep them from learning God's word?" each one was able to answer yes to this according to the Ten Commandments and say, "God has forbidden all such things, and he will punish them." Hundreds of things could be enumerated in this way. It was also shown that the passage in Philemon was far from proving that Paul wishes for Philemon to set Onesimus free, but this passage was perhaps not clear for many, which is why one should rather hold to the clear passage in 1 Timothy 6.

Pastor Fjeld could not express otherwise than that slavery is a sin in itself. If Paul or the Apostles in the first Christian time allowed many things that were remnants of heathenism or Jewry [*Levninger af Hedenskabet eller Jødedommen*], it is not possible to conclude from that that these were not also sins. Thus, we see that Paul allowed one to circumcise. He thought that slavery strove against the spirit of the entire New Testament.

From the other side, it was mentioned in response that the Apostles never allowed sinful remnants of heathenism and that circumcision, which God himself commanded in the Old Testament, was not a sin in itself. Certainly, many sins hang around believers, but God forbids and condemns all these sins and commands us to refrain from them. If slavery had been a sin in itself, he would have had to punish those "believing masters," just as he punished the harlot (1 Cor 5:1), and then he could not have called those slave owners "believing and beloved."

Pastor Muus also expressed that it was not a sin in itself to hold slaves; however, he believed that Christianity would lead one to abolish such a corrupt institution, and therefore a continuation of slavery would be a sin.

Svege also expressed that slavery is not a sin in itself but an evil against which every citizen should work in love and by lawful means.

Thor Halvorsen expressed roughly the same thing that when one speaks of slavery in itself, it could not be a sin, for then Paul would have needed to punish those Christian slave owners and required them to set their Christian slaves free or otherwise enjoined the congregation to ban them as other obstinate sinners.

C. L. Clausen declared also that slavery is not a sin in itself according to God's word, but that it is similarly clear according to God's word that it is one of the greatest temporal evils, which every Christian therefore must wish to do away with and in love seek to abolish.

Erik Ellessen still expressed that slavery must be a sin and could not find otherwise. He thought that maybe those slaves about whom Paul spoke were such as were sold for debts or set in slavery for crimes. That one man can have absolute ownership rights over another, he thought, was in any case contrary to God's word, and he did not think it to be obvious from the stated passages that slavery could be said not to be a sin in any other case but for crimes.

I. Ingebrigtsen also needed to confess that he even still could not recognize that the stated passages or the proofs used convinced him that slavery in general could be said not to be a sin. He thought that the other side spoke of an ideal slavery, which does not exist in reality.

Finally, the whole of the Synod's pastors presented the following unanimous declaration: Though according to God's word, it is not a sin in itself to hold slaves, slavery is however in itself an evil and a punishment of God, and we condemn all the abuses that are connected to it as sins just as we, when our vocation requires it, and when Christian love and wisdom command it, will work for its abrogation.

A. C. Preus, C. L. Clausen, N. Brandt, H. A. Preus, J. A. Otteson, V. Koren, Laur. Larsen, F. Chr. Claussen, N. E. Jensen, B. J. Muus, C. F. Magelssen, H. P. Duborg n.b. Pastor Stub was absent.

To the question of the laymen in the assembly, whether they were content with this declaration as it contained the teaching of the pastors [*Prästernes Lære*], twenty-eight answered yes, ten no, twenty-eight did not vote, two were absent (see the registry of names, Appendix 1).⁶

Later, the following declaration was presented, which was resolved to add to the proceedings: The undersigned members of the Synod see themselves hereby obliged to give the following

Declaration

Slavery, considered as an institution, can only stand [*bestaae*] through certain laws, and since the laws by which it is supported stand in obvious conflict with God's word and Christian love, it is a sin. And since slavery in the United States has been one of this country's greatest evils both for the church and the state, we consider it our absolute obligation as Christians and good citizens to do all that is within our power by lawful means to mitigate, to lessen, and if possible to abolish slavery when our country's best [*vort Lands Bedste*] and Christian love require it of us.

This our declaration is strongly requested to be added to the proceedings. E. Ellesson, Jorgen Olsen Wraalstad, Gulbrand Myre, Johannes E. Lee, Ole Olsen Wraalstad, Halvor A. Aasen, Isak Aslagsen, Lars Jaer, Ole A. Ruste

Endnotes

- 1 *Kirkelig Maanedstidende: Organ for Den Norsk-Evangelisk-Lutherske Kirke i Amerika: Sjette Aargang*. (Madison, WI: Skandinaviske Presseforening, 1861), 258–262.
- 2 Christian J. Einertson, “Sorrow and Gladness: Norwegian Studies at Concordia College.” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 91, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 33–44.
- 3 Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America: The American Transition* (Northfield, MN: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1940).
- 4 cf. Daniel P. Marggraf, “The Lutheran Church Responds to Conflict: The Civil War and Its Issues in Nineteenth Century America.” Master of Divinity, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2014, and C. O. Smith, “The Evangelical Lutheran Tennessee Synod’s Attitude Toward the Negro Both as Slave and as Freedman.” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1949): 145–149.
- 5 cf. Thomas Manteufel, “Walther’s View on Slavery.” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2013):12–23.
- 6 The appendix in *Kirkelig Maanedstidende*, 267–268 lists the vote of each layman: Teacher P. Hekton, Gunder Sørum, Thor Halvorsen, Thore Helgesen, Johannes J. Lindløkken, Aslak Olsnäs, John Hove, Elling Hove, Lars Larsen Lövberget, Halvor Gjerdjord, Nicolai Erdahl, Christian Forseth, John Svendholdt, N. Svege, Lars K. Aaker, Kjöstul Evensen, Nils Fosmark, Gregor Kittelsen, Nils O. Grimestad, Jacob Midbøe, Sjur Hansen, Aslak Aabye, A. Aadnesen, Christen Lie, Christian Smedsrud, Ole Herbrandsen, Gulbrand Lommen, and Ole Bækken voted yes; Jörgen Andreas Nilsen, Thore Hong, Erik R. Sævre, Christian E. Rukke, Knud Steen, Mikkel Brunlaug, Gunder Mandt, Gulbrand Lyste, Torkild Guldbrandsen, Iver Dahl, Ole Ruste, Hans Schager, Johan Ruud, Torger Guttormsen, Lars Røthe, Nils Lie, Peder Jenson, Hans Hansen Spilde, Jacob Andersen, Johannes E. Lie, Hans Dale, Gjermund Gjermundsen, Knud Ingebrigtsen, Halle Stensland, Ingebret Salvesen, Henrik Iversen Domholdt, Gulbrand Olsen, and Isak Aslaksan did not vote; E. Ellessen, Ole Wraastad, Jörgen O. Wraalstad, Harald Omelstad, Halvor Aasen, Peder Golberg, Iver Ingebrigtsen, Gulbrand Myhra, Lars Jaer, and Herman Pedersen voted no; Ole Flesje was sick; and Jens J. Næset was travelling.