



The Georg

NEWSLETTER

Sixth Annual Meeting of GSS to be Held in Mpls

In this Issue:

Sixth Annual Meeting to be Held in Mpls	1
April Discussion Forum, Radcliffe, IA	1
"Never an Unfree Man"	2
Aims and Activities of the Society	4
Fifty Years Under the Southern Cross	4

Georg Sverdrup

- Born to Pastor Harold Ulrich Sverdrup and his wife Caroline Metella, nee Suur, at Balestrand, Sogn, Norway, on December 16, 1848.
- Died on May 3, 1907, in Minneapolis, MN, and buried in the Lakewood Cemetery

Saturday, October 10, will mark the sixth annual meeting of the Georg Sverdrup Society. The event will be held in the chapel on the AFLC Schools campus at 3120 East Medicine Lake Boulevard, Minneapolis, MN. Lunch will begin at 12:00, followed by the program at 1:00 and the annual business meeting at 2:30.

The speaker for the program will be Rev. Robert Lee, speaking on the topic, "Pastoral Training for the Congregation." The translation and discussion focus for 2009 is "Sverdrup's View of Pastoral Education," and Pastor Lee will give perspective on this subject.

Sverdrup's views on pastoral education, sometimes known as "The Augsburg Plan," were hotly debated among Lutherans in his day. How should a

pastor be trained in order to serve a free congregation? How should a seminary train pastors to be spiritual leaders of congregations, without them becoming spiritual dictators? What should be the focus of seminary education? What should it avoid? Sverdrup had strong beliefs on this issue and spoke and wrote tirelessly on the necessity for the "right kind" of pastoral education needed in order to preserve "a free church in a free land."

A graduate of Augsburg College and the Association Free Lutheran Theological Seminary, Pastor Lee served as the third president of the AFLC from 1992 until 2007. Since then he has been on the faculty of the AFLC Schools in Minneapolis. Pastor Lee also holds a Th.M. from



Pastor Robert Lee

Bethel Seminary in St. Paul.

Mrs. Marian Christopherson, Director of Publications and Parish Education for the AFLC, will lead this year's "Sverdrup Songfest," which once again will focus on hymns from our Lutheran heritage that were sung during Sverdrup's day. Bring a friend. Non-members are always welcome.

April Discussion Forum Held in Radcliffe, IA

It could hardly be called a large crowd that gathered in Salem Lutheran Church in rural Radcliffe, IA, on Saturday, April 18, for the GSS Discussion Forum. But then again, it was a warm spring day with threatening rain in this corn-growing

country of central Iowa, and many, no doubt, were involved in the spring-planting ritual.

Nevertheless, those in attendance appreciated the presentations from Rev. Andrew Coyle on "Martin Luther: The Father of Modern Missions," Rev. Eugene Enderlein on "Lutheran

Pietism: The Mother of Modern Missions," and Rev. Martin Horn on "Sverdrup and the Problem of Mission Unity Among Norwegian Lutherans in America." Discussion followed each presentation.



“Never an Unfree Man”

The Norwegian “Viking Roots” of Free Lutheranism

This paper was sparked by a question from our president, Loiell Dyrud — “Why did the Norwegian Lutherans in America organize differently from other Scandinavians?” Loiell notes that Norwegian Lutherans in America splintered into multiple church bodies, while other Scandinavians tended to form unified Lutheran churches on ethnic lines.

I do not presume to be able explain this diversity comprehensively. What I’d like to offer is a hypothesis that might contribute to a *partial* explanation based on my research in my own field of interest, Viking history.

P. J. Eikeland in a 1926 essay on Hans Nielsen Hauge describes the politics of Viking Age Norway as understood in his own time:

... even in ancient times there was fully *popular government* in Norway, although it was somewhat aristocratic, as the great farmers . . . in Norway had more to say than the small farmers. Every district . . . was like an aristocratic republic. But *democratic* it was. . .

The Battle of Stiklestad, with its army of farmers led by farmer chieftains, provides a very illustrative picture of the situation. It was the farmer chieftains who had driven St. Olaf to *Gardarike* (Russia), and it was these same farmer chieftains who incited the Battle of Stiklestad.

Further along, speaking of the development of centralized monarchical authority following the reign of King Sverre (12th century), Eikeland writes:

The Norwegian farmer has been excluded from everything that can be called *government*. . . . But their *personal* freedom they have as before, [they] can order the affairs of themselves and their own as they wish. . . . And *this* freedom they retained down through the ages. The Norwegian farmer has never been an *unfree* man, a *slave*, something farmers in nearly all other European countries

became over time. . . .

The essential point—the thing which (Eikeland believes) makes Norway almost unique and which (I suggest) may help to explain Free Church ecclesiology—is this proud assertion: “The Norwegian farmer has never been an *unfree* man.”

Speaking of the Vikings, the historian Magnus Magnusson writes, “I can never resist reminding my sceptical friends that it was these allegedly pitiless savages who introduced the very word *law* into the English language!” A line from the Icelandic *Njal’s Saga* expresses a classic Viking Age attitude: “*With laws shall our land be built up but with lawlessness laid waste.*”

This Icelandic law was a direct outgrowth of Norwegian law. Torgrim Titlestad, professor of history at the University of Stavanger, says of this law:

... The point is that after the time of the Great Migration the Scandinavians adapted and further developed the confederative method of running things so that it became an integral part of the Norse social system and came to full expression in the Viking period.

What was the distinctive nature of this early, *confederative* Norwegian political system? I think (as does Titlestad) that the answer is best illustrated through an 11th Century conflict between two remarkable men with very different political philosophies—King Olaf Haraldsson (better known to us as St. Olaf) and Erling Skjalgsson of Sola.

Erling Skjalgsson (c. 965-1028) was a southwestern Norwegian chieftain who held the hereditary (but democratically confirmed) title of *hersir*. A *hersir* was essentially a military commander who coordinated regional defense levies.

According to *Heimskringla* (The Sagas of the Norwegian Kings), King Olaf Trygvesson confronted the southwesterners at the Gula Thing (assembly) about the year 995, de-

manding that they elect him king and be baptized. The leaders agreed, but only on the condition that Olaf marry his sister Astrid to Erling Skjalgsson.

A very interesting exchange occurs at the time of Erling’s wedding to Astrid. In the words of Snorri:

King Olav . . . offered to give Erling a *jarldom*. But Erling said: “Hersers have my kinsmen always been and I will have no higher rank than they.”

Jarl (earl) would seem to be a more exalted title than *hersir*. What then would explain his refusal to accept a social and political promotion?

Titlestad perceptively explains it this way:

Erling could accept a collaboration between equal partners . . . , but to have accepted the title which Olaf offered him would have meant the same as being the king’s subject—of being subordinate. By laying claim to the title of *hersir* Erling Skjalgsson made it clear to both Olaf and the other Gula Thing chieftains that he, Erling, was and would continue to be, the most important leader of Vestland according to the ancient independent status of the title in the region. With this he also highlighted the old principle of confederate self-government among the different chiefdoms.

Thus, while receiving a princess in marriage along with the extended power that came to him as a wedding gift, Erling successfully blocked any plans Olaf might have had to subordinate the traditional Norwegian democratic system (in Vestland, at least) to a more continental-style monarchy.

This arrangement ended with Olaf

“Never an Unfree Man” (continued)

Trygvesson’s death around 1000 A.D. Yet so secure was Erling’s position that he was able to largely ignore the administration of the jarls who ruled next on behalf of the king of Denmark. Erling seems to have run Vestland almost as an independent country.

Everything changed again in 1015, when a second Olaf appeared to claim the throne of Norway. This was Olaf Haraldsson (c. 995-1030), who had lived in Normandy and had observed there a distinctly un-Norwegian government. Johan Schreiner writes of the Norman Duke Richard II, “The ruler had complete control over the bishops and the church was in effect an important instrument for carrying out decisions that were in the hands of the duke.”

It seems likely that Olaf Haraldsson had adopted a vision of kingship in which, under God as supreme Monarch, the king was the divine surrogate on earth.

Having arrived in Norway and driven the *jarls* out, Olaf met with Erling in 1016. Rather than accommodating himself to Norwegian tradition, this new Olaf demanded subordination. Erling’s area of governance would be reduced. The title *hersir*, which he had retained so stubbornly, was abolished. Erling would now be a *lenderman* (landed man) under the king. He had been reduced to something like what would later be called a “vassal.” Erling saw no alternative to submission at that point, though he remained characteristically uncooperative and insubordinate.

Then followed years of conflict

involving both threats and murders, culminating in Erling’s joining King Canute the Great of Denmark/England in driving Olaf out. But on his way to exile in Russia, Olaf managed to ambush Erling’s ship and to massacre all his crew, last of all (against Olaf’s orders) Erling himself.

According to *Heimskringla*, Olaf’s words to the killer were, “Now hast thou struck Norway from my hands.”

Olaf had no choice then but to continue his flight, to exile in Russia and a last desperate foray back into Norway, ending in the Battle of Stiklestad and “martyrdom” in 1030.

Did Erling fail? Did Olaf’s final victory—not military, but the triumph of a monarchical ideal—put an end to Erling’s confederative vision?

Titlestad doesn’t think so.

Had it not been for the existence of the powerful leadership and personality of Erling Skjalgsson . . . during this decisive historical period, these kings would most probably have been able to push through their *Norwegian idea* in a clearly centralist monarchical direction. Erling succeeded in acting as a modifying force with respect to the two Olafs, both of whom appeared on the scene as external agents intent on introducing new European forms of rule. He probably contributed to the remoulding and Norwegianizing of some of the more extreme attitudes of the newly converted heir apparents [sic]. . . .

I can find no reference to Erling,

or even to his times, in the works of Sverdrup with which I am familiar. And indeed I make no claim that Sverdrup had these matters in mind. His eyes were always on Scripture. The apostolic church was his model. He was no Grundtvig, attempting to resurrect an imagined, idealized Viking past.

My contention is that Sverdrup was the heir to a Norwegian cultural tradition which valued freedom as a priceless birthright, and decentralized government as a liberating principle. For Sverdrup, the new land of America provided an opportunity for Norwegians to stand tall again as men and as members of independent Christian congregations:

But in all this, the spirit of the people is nevertheless unbowed, and it longs unceasingly for a greater work and a brighter life than that to which it is often compelled by hard necessity. And the deepest cause of the mighty emigration, of the often incomprehensible zeal with which old and young yearn for that great, unknown America, is longing—longing for wider and freer prospects, brighter and friendlier days than those they enjoy. The cottager is wearied with consuming his strength between rock-fall and stone, the fisherman with risking his life day after day in a small, fragile boat on the great, wild ocean. The farmer is disgusted at always having to bow his back under great burdens and heavy impositions, while outsiders seem to him to enjoy the benefits which he himself has earned through bitter labor.



One is reminded of the old Vikings who, rather than bowing to a high king in Norway, took their ships, families, and property to Iceland and there set up a republic under the rule of law.

If you had asked Georg Sverdrup what he thought of Erling Skjalgsson, he likely would have repeated the judgment that prevailed in his day—Erling had been a traitor, who sold good St. Olaf to the Dane for gold. But recent historians have begun to view Olaf’s legacy as ambivalent and to recognize that medieval hagiography must be read with skepticism. P. H. Sawyer, for instance, writes, “Erling, and men like him, played an important part in the conversion of Norway as did Olaf, and it was indeed in Erling’s territory that most of the early Christian crosses were erected.”

If Olaf Haraldsson is seen as a pioneer of the kind of centralized, authoritarian polity against which Sverdrup rebelled, one can easily regard Sverdrup and Erling as brothers in spirit—Norwegians in the ancient tradition of the farmer who “has never been an *unfree* man.”



THE GEORG SVERDRUP SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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(The Word Became Flesh)

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The Georg Sverdrup Society was organized in December 2003 and is open to anyone interested in the life and work of noted Norwegian-American theologian Georg Sverdrup (1848-1907). The society is registered in the State of Minnesota as a 501(C)(3) nonprofit corporation. Its activities, which are guided by a seven-member board of directors, include:

Promoting the study and understanding of the New Testament congregation as understood and explained by Georg Sverdrup;

Endeavoring to advance the ideal of “free and living congregations” as envisioned by Sverdrup;

Seeking to foster further translation of Sverdrup’s writings into English;

Encouraging the study and application of the “Fundamental Principles” and “Rules for Work” as used in the Lutheran Free Church and as continuing to be used in the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations;

Enlarging the interest in Sverdrup’s works by organizing discussion groups and providing speakers on request;

Operating a **Sverdrup Society** website linked to <www.aflc.org> for members of the Society and others interested in the life and work of Georg Sverdrup;

Maintaining a current bibliography of Sverdrup’s translated work as well as a current bibliography of materials written about him;

Publishing a newsletter for members that provides information on the Society’s activities as well as general information about Georg Sverdrup;

- And encouraging research and study of Sverdrup’s life and work by publishing an annual **Sverdrup Journal**.

50 Years Under the Southern Cross

By John H. Abel

Reviewed by Dr. Francis Monseth

John Abel, a member of the Georg Sverdrup Society, has recently written an interesting account of the pioneering mission work that he and his wife, Ruby, were engaged in for more than a half century in Brazil.

The book recounts God’s faithfulness to His Word in the Abel’s involvement in planting churches, founding a Bible school and seminary, and developing a Christian camp.

This book is an exciting adventure story demonstrating God’s provision and protection in difficult and sometimes impossible circumstances. It is also a fasci-

nating history of the advance of Christian missions in what were once the frontiers of Brazil. It is an amazing testimony of the power of the Gospel to change lives, from a gambling hall owner to abandoned children on the streets. It is a thrilling description of miraculous deliverance. It is a moving report of timely answers to prayer, including physical healing and rescue from near-death experiences.

The reader will be encouraged, challenged, and blessed by the story of John and Ruby Abel. It is the earnest prayer of this dedicated couple that God would receive all the praise and glory for the many abiding fruits of their long ministry.

The cost of the book is \$14.50 plus \$2.50 for shipping and mailing. *50 Years Under the Southern Cross* can be ordered from Mercy and Truth Publishers, 19594 350th Street NW,



Newfolden, MN, 56738.