

The Importance of Church History

Church history is important not merely for nostalgic thoughts of the past but for its ability to teach in the present. A study of church history teaches the events of the past which have led to the present which looks to the future. An individual church or church body will gain a good grasp on where it is going if it knows where it has been. Now the past will not always be pretty. Any church has dealt with its own particular hardships, doctrinal disputes, and divisions – Scarville and Center Lutheran Churches are no different. But a greater knowledge of the history of these churches does explain their present existence and by the grace of God, lights the path to the future.

Researching the histories of Scarville and Center was interesting because they have not remained in the same church buildings but have remained in the same area. The Center Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church was born out of the North Prairie Evangelical Lutheran Church. North Prairie was organized in 1869 by the frontier Reverend Torger Andreas Torgerson, or T. A. Torgerson for short. Everything about North Prairie was moving along smoothly until the Reverend Emil Hansen was called to the church. But it was not his arrival that stirred up the peaceful waters, it was a merger. This merger occurred in 1917 among the largest Norwegian church bodies in America at that time, the United Church, the Norwegian Synod, and the Haugean Synod. Citing reasons from the Word of God, the Rev. Hansen did not take part in the merger, and he was supported by only a small minority. This group formed Center Church in the winter of 1918.

The history of Scarville Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church is very similar, although slightly more disjointed. The families that would eventually form Scarville Church were first members of Lime Creek Evangelical Lutheran Church organized in 1860. However in 1887, the Rev. T. A. Torgerson advised those members who lived a few miles southwest of Lime Creek to begin meeting under his guidance in their homes. Although the Rev. T. A. did not meet with them as much as he would have liked, his son, the Rev. A. M. Torgerson, picked up the slack. This group built a church in Scarville in 1901 and officially adopted the name the Immanuel Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1907. Because of substantial growth in the area Norwegian Lutheran churches, Immanuel Church and North Prairie Church formed a parish in 1906. But in the same way the North Prairie congregation divided in 1917, so did the Immanuel Church. From this congregation, an even smaller minority went with the Rev. Hansen – eight families in all – to form Scarville Lutheran Church. The Lime Creek congregation lost some members in the late 1860s who supported the teachings of the Rev. C. L. Clausen, but they today remain in fellowship with the Scarville and Center Churches.

Tracing the origins of the Center and Scarville congregations is a bit challenging, but a direct path can be established from the beginnings of the early Norwegian Lutheran churches in the area to the present. Why is this important? The lines traced from North Prairie of 1869 and Lime Creek of 1860, are not just neat historical ones but are strong, doctrinal ones. At present, Scarville Lutheran Church and Center Lutheran Church can still claim the very doctrinal foundations, beliefs, and teachings as those churches in the nineteenth century. Nothing about what is preached in the pulpit, what is given at the communion rail, what happens at the baptismal font has changed in this established history.

After North Prairie and Immanuel went with the 1917 merger, their church body – the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America (NLCA) – renamed itself the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC). In 1930 it joined other church bodies to form The American Lutheran Church (TALC). By 1988, it joined with even more church bodies to become the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). From 1860 or 1869 or 1901 until today, a complete continuity of doctrine cannot be claimed. Any departure from the biblical, theological history of one's church is truly a dangerous and sad event because this departure indicates a compromise of the Word of God.

Just as a study of the histories of Scarville and Center, North Prairie and Immanuel, prove where these

churches are today, history may also indicate the paths these churches will continue to follow. If the congregation members at Scarville and Center Lutheran Churches remember where their churches came from, and what they stood for, they should see clearly how they ought to continue. But if ever this important history of the churches should be forgotten, then good direction toward the future could easily be lost. On the other hand, if the North Prairie and Immanuel Churches study the doctrinal roots of their history, they may begin to understand the extent that they have departed from the uncompromising standard of biblical doctrine held to in the early history of the churches.

To be sure, the history of all these churches is quite important. Even a church history that indicates a departure from the Word of God needs to be studied, for that can teach today's church to humbly correct the errors of the past. Considering the histories of Scarville and Center Lutheran Churches, its members can identify much that can help guide them into the future. A church history that looks to Christ crucified as its only source of forgiveness, life, and salvation is unshakeable and impenetrable to the most desperate attempts of the devil and his divisive work. The Bible emphasizes, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). The message of Christ must remain at the heart of all that our churches do and teach. This was surely the case for our religious ancestors, and their legacy is definitely a history to treasure and follow.

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