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Recollections of S. D. Rodholm

By Peter D. Thomsen

In both pulpit and classroom, S. D. Rodholm was a great teacher and a true servant of the church. His capacity for learning and discernment was enormous, yet he never used big words nor in any way intimidated anyone. To me, he was always the wise, old seer. He made it very clear that his purpose in teaching was not to make cut and dried theologians out of us. His purpose, rather, was to help us, his students, become servants of THE WORD. He said many times, "Simple Christianity has been my life's goal." He hoped it would also be ours.

I can summarize what S. D. taught me in a few simple statements: 1) The Bible is indispensable for Christian preaching and teaching. We must be careful, however, not to use it as a paper pope. 2) Anything in either Hebrew or Greek scriptures that conflicts with the love and spirit that is of Christ should not be taken seriously. 3) The imagery of the Bible, not its literal language, conveys the message God wants conveyed. Therefore, when dealing with a text, ask yourself—what is the message here, the WORD behind the words? 4) Freedom is not something that exists in and of or by itself; freedom is a gift that God bestows on us in the fellowship of His church. We are made free from something in order that we might be made free for something. 5) The Holy Spirit is the one who brings us to life. He comforts and gives us strength. He grants us the power, the nerve, the will, to live and act. He nurtures us and sustains us in the hope that the good work God in Christ has begun in us will on the last day be made complete. For all this and more, I am grateful to the insights and dedicated teaching of S. D. Rodholm. He was esteemed not only by me but by many other people as well. At his best, he was as humble as an old shoe. I thank God for every good remembrance I have of him.

From my Grand View College Years, 1940-42

Although he had previously translated a number of Danish hymns, it wasn't until about 1939-40 that S. D. began to translate many of the folk songs commonly sung at Grand View College and wherever else Danish Americans gathered. I don't know the exact number of songs he translated, but I remember him coming to the college many

times during 1940, just as our evening *andagt* (devotions) ended. With him he would bring several typewritten copies of a song he was in the process of translating. Wanting to try out his latest endeavor, he would invite us to gather around the piano for a trial run. Then S. D. would say, "I think this needs a few changes" or "I think this one sings pretty well." Once in a while, someone in the student body would suggest a song he or she would like translated. S. D.'s usual response was, "No, that one would be too difficult," but then he'd go ahead and translate it anyway. His translation of the Danish Christmas songs became our favorites. During the 1940 yuletide season, when we gathered in the college *dagligstue* (the lounge of Old Main) to "sing Christmas in," a number of S. D.'s translations were used for the first time. This pre-Christmas gathering was a Grand View tradition. At an appropriate moment during our week-long, every evening just-before-supper-hour of singing, we would hear a Christmas story read by one of the faculty members, then sing and dance around the Christmas tree. We always ended with "Nu er det jul igen" (Now it is Christmas again).

I am under the impression that most of the Danish songs S. D. translated, certainly those completed in 1940, were published in the first edition of *A World of Song*. S. D. threw himself headlong into this literary effort. As a consequence, a large number of songs common to the folk tradition of the Danish people are now available in English. Today we sing them with gusto at family camps, family reunions, small group gatherings, and at regional meetings in Des Moines, Tyler, Solvang, and Menucha. It is true that no one nowadays is intensely engaged in translating Danish hymns or folk songs to English. Every now and then, however, a single new translation appears, because somewhere, someone with both the interest and the ability said, "Wouldn't it be fun to also have *this* song in translation?"

From my Seminary Years, 1942-45: His Best Wine Saved for the Last

I'll always remember the time S. D. opened and served the last bottle he had on hand of his own homemade strawberry wine. The occasion was a party for the seminary students, in his home. The date probably was February 25, his birthday (I don't remember the precise year), but I had never before tasted such delicious wine. Many times since, without luck, I have looked for strawberry wine in liquor stores and wine shops. I'll continue to do so. If I ever come upon some, I'll

buy a bottle or two. Then, the next chance I get, I'll celebrate with my seminary classmates, in remembrance of S. D., and say, "Skål, to S. D."

In my recollections of S. D., it would be a sin if I did not mention Mrs. Rodholm. She was a remarkable lady—strong, straightforward, down-to-earth, kind, hospitable, and friendly. Whether at the college, in church, on the street, or at home, she greeted us with a pleasant smile. Whenever I stopped by at the Rodholm home, usually in the evening, to have a visit with S. D., he and I would sit in his study and talk about everything under the sun. Mrs. Rodholm would be nearby in the living room, crocheting, knitting, or doing some kind of embroidery. Then, at the proper moment, she would say, "*Kaffen er færdig*" (the coffee is ready). She was, indeed, a gracious hostess. I especially remember the bridal shower she gave for my wife Kirstine, a week or so before our wedding. S. D. had agreed to officiate. Everyone at Grand View [College] was invited, of course, as were members of Luther Memorial Church. The reception afterwards was to be in the college dining room, but it was Mrs. Rodholm who initiated this big event in our lives with the shower she gave for Kirstine. While it was being held in her home, S. D. invited me to join him for an evening of conversation at his daughter Asta's house. (Asta's husband was in the military at the time, so she and her two small children had moved to Des Moines during the war to be near her parents.) The evening began with small talk, then, out of the clear blue, S. D. said, "Would you like a rum and Coke?" I had never before had one, but I wasn't going to tell him that, so I said, "Yes, that would be nice." After a while, he offered me another one, then made one more for himself. I don't remember how long we sat and nipped, but I remember wondering if, when I got up, I'd be able to stand up. Fortunately, I was able to, so when Mrs. Rodholm called to say the shower was over and we should come and have coffee, S. D. and I walked the short distance to where he and Mrs. Rodholm lived on Sheridan Avenue. Ever since that night, rum and Coke has been a favorite drink of mine. I never have one without thinking about S. D. and his dear wife. I believe her first name was Marie, but she was always Mrs. Rodholm to me.

Some Remembered Sayings of S. D. Rodholm

"The gospel of John was not written as a biography, nor as a mere chronicle of remembered events. It was written, rather, as an expres-

sion of John's hope that the WORD, which meant so much to him, might somehow come alive for those who were to come after him." In saying this, S. D. acknowledged his debt to Grundtvig, who proclaimed that the "living, spoken word is the vehicle of the Spirit." Grundtvig also taught that "the written word is the shadow of the spoken word. Therefore, when writing the word down the best one can hope for is that the shadow will bring out the living, spoken word again."

"The self-revelation of God, which began at creation, when the first word was spoken, culminated when the last word was spoken, that is, when the WORD was made flesh."

"A sign is not important in itself, but in what it points to, and in John's gospel what the sign(s) always point(s) to is the WORD." In John's Gospel the signs are the wedding at Cana (chapter 2), the healing of the Roman official's son (chapter 4), the healing of the thirty-eight-year old paralytic (chapter 5), the feeding of the five thousand (chapter 6), the healing of the man born blind (chapter 9), and the raising of Lazarus from the dead (chapter 11). Each of these signs point to the WORD, the one through whom God has spoken. He is the joy of life, the health and wholeness of life, the bread of life, the light of life, the resurrection and the life."

"You cannot see the Kingdom of God from the outside. To see God's kingdom you must enter it ... like a child. The nearest thing to the divine on this earth is the little child in the cradle."

"The true test of faith is taking Jesus' word for it." This was S. D.'s comment on the healing of the Roman official's son. The official simply took Jesus' word for it and went his way. "This is the supreme picture of faith."

"The WORD is the only foundation we have for faith."

Commenting on John 1, John's story of the first disciples, S. D. said, "This was how it all began, just four young men walking with the Master from Jerusalem to Cana. They were the first synod. A synod was mobile then. They were in no particular hurry. ... After calling his first disciples, Jesus began his ministry, by going to a wedding, not a funeral."

"You cannot reach true Christianity by logically thinking it out. ... Christianity is not a new teaching, that is, a new system of teaching. Christianity is *life*, and you don't get life from books, schools, or philosophy. Life comes from above."

“Jesus did not want to be a reformer, but a regenerator. No less would do.”

“It is easier to condemn evil than to establish good. The only way to do away with a life is to establish truth. The same holds true for evil and good. Maybe you can stop something evil by force temporarily but you can’t promote anything good by force.”

“When a church falls down in its spiritual work, it resorts to clean-up campaigns. It is not the business of the church to clean up a city. That is the business of all decent citizens.”

“Grace is love that is undeserved. The true relationship between God and man is grace.”

Low View of the Liturgy, High View of the Word

S. D. Rodholm would have felt uncomfortable and out of place in today’s church of vested clergy. Cassock, surplice, stole, chasuble, pectoral cross, cape—all these were not just adiaphora, they were anathema to S. D. He also made fun of the Danish *pibekrave* (the fluted, ruffled collar that pastors in the Church of Denmark wear); S. D. called it a “millstone.” The clerical collar worn by Roman Catholic and Episcopalian priests (nowadays also by many Lutheran ministers) was no less ridiculous to him—he called it a “dog collar.” Thus, in terms of clerical garb, S. D. Rodholm was very “low church.” When leading worship services, he wore the plain black Geneva gown. The less attention drawn to oneself the better was his motto.

With regard to the church’s authorized order of worship, S. D. had no qualms about taking a few liberties. It did not bother him to omit the collect for the day. I don’t think he ever used it. The language of the traditional collects was too penitential for him. (How many times in the worship service do we have to repent, for heaven’s sake?) Therefore, instead of using the day’s collect, S. D., after the opening hymn, went directly to the altar, faced the congregation, announced and read the day’s Epistle. Immediately thereafter the congregation sang the doxology (“Praise God from whom all blessings flow”). Then came the second hymn and the sermon.

S. D. was a true ecumenist. From the pulpit, before reading the Gospel lesson, S. D. would lead the congregation in the creed, saying, “Let us confess the faith into which we have been baptized.” It was customary in the Danish church for the creed to be said aloud

only by the minister, so, when confessing the faith, he used the word "we:" "We believe in God, the Father, almighty, creator of heaven and earth." In the second article, he made a distinct and deliberate pause after the word suffered: "suffered (pause) under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried." Instead of saying "descended into hell," S. D. always said "descended among the dead." In the third article he introduced the word "one:" "We believe in the Holy Spirit, one holy Christian church." At the end of the creed, he used the term "life eternal" instead of "life everlasting." He did this deliberately because "life everlasting," in his view, was a quantitative term. Our focus should be on the qualitative character of the life that flows from God's spirit. Life eternal begins here, now, in this place, at this time, among us, and within us.

Following his sermon came the prayer of the church. The words used, however, were S. D.'s, not those of a book. He gave thanks "for every good day and every good gift." He made a petition for the "church that exists within all churches." He remembered and asked God to be with "those who are afraid to die, and those who are afraid to live." During the years of World War II he enfolded the congregation's concern in a petition for the men and women in the nation's armed forces, and he prayed that "we might win the peace and not just the war." His prayer was never long, and it always ended with the Lord's Prayer. I'll never forget the first time I heard him say it. *He prays like a Presbyterian*, I thought. "Forgive us our debts," he said, "as we forgive our debtors." That is not the way Lutherans say the Lord's Prayer. It wasn't until later, when I entered the seminary and became S. D.'s student, that I learned the explanation for his choice of words. Nowhere in the Greek New Testament manuscripts do the words "trespass" or "trespasses" appear. The New Testament words in Greek are "debt" and "debtors." They are also by far the stronger and more meaningful words, so why not stick with them? Why use words that crept in as a liturgical addition sometime during the Middle Ages?

S. D. never used the salutation, "The Lord be with you." To him this smacked too much of triumphalism. For this reason also he never raised his hands when pronouncing the benediction, and he never made the sign of the cross. He simply faced the congregation, folded his hands, and said the words of Aaron: "The Lord bless you and keep you," etc.

The only time during the service when S. D.'s liturgical practice allowed a "high church" appearance came after the sermon when, following the hymn that was sung, he stood before the altar and chanted the collect for the Word. This may seem inconsistent with S. D.'s "low church" stance, but if you know anything at all about his theology, you know that chanting this particular collect was not incongruous. For him, the WORD was the heart and soul of Christian worship. In a special way, therefore, with praise and thanksgiving, he lifted up the WORD, and he did this, I might add, in a beautiful way. He had a strong, clear baritone voice, and there was nothing theatrical about his chanting.

To these remembrances of S. D. Rodholm's liturgical practices let me add another. When he read the biblical lessons he refused to use the words "thee," "thy," "thou," or "thine." This was not because he had difficulty with the "th" sound, as many in his Danish peer group did. No, his refusal to use these words was that he believed they were archaic. To the average person in the pew, the words "thee," "thou," and "thine" are formal words of address. They tend, therefore, to put God off in the distance. There was a time, S. D. acknowledged, when such words in the English language constituted a more personal form of address, but in this century such words are obsolete. In reading the scriptures, therefore, whenever S. D. came to a "thee" or "thy," a "thou" or a "thine," he used, as a substitute, the word "you," "your," or "yours." Let it be remembered, this was before the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament was published in 1946. Only when he led in saying the Lord's Prayer did S. D. revert to the old English "thee," "thy," "thine" form of address. (Some traditions die hard!) Today, I think, S. D. might have preferred using the contemporary ecumenical version of the Lord's Prayer now optional in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.

Was S. D. an iconoclast? Yes and no. If he could have had his way, he would have removed the altar from the church. In its place he would have placed a big, very generous-sized table with maybe one chair at the head. On the wall behind that he might have had an appropriate original painting. He did not, however, care for stained glass windows, statues, cathedral-size candelabra, missile stands, huge pulpit Bibles, eternal lights, etc. He certainly would not have tolerated acolytes playing church. "Plain is better" might well be the motto that describes S. D. Rodholm's low church liturgical taste. One

should not conclude from this, however, that he had little aesthetic sense. He loved great art in all its forms, but the right setting for these was not the ordinary church typical of most Danish congregations in the United States.

Changes that S. D. made in the Sunday service were not made without forethought or explanation. He did not believe in doing something just because "that's the way it's done in other churches." Chris Sorensen, therefore, who took up the offering at Luther Memorial Church in Des Moines, could put the collection box where he always did, in the windowsill of the large west side window. S. D. had no appreciation of the so-called theology of stewardship that ends up making a big production out of every Sunday's offering. The mode of giving, common in Jewish temple worship (cf Mark 12: 41-44 and Luke 21: 1-4) was, in S. D.'s view, the more appropriate way for a church to collect its money.

S. D. did not consider the frequency of the Eucharist to be of any great importance, nor were the elements of bread and wine in themselves of any great importance. What was important in this sacrament is the WORD and Spirit. That was his view. With regard to the inner meaning of Holy Communion, S. D. found no satisfaction in traditional church doctrine. He regarded the Roman Catholic view of transubstantiation ("it looks like wine, it tastes like wine, but it is the blood of Christ") as "hocus pocus," akin to magic. Consubstantiation, the Lutheran view, that Christ is truly present in, with, and under the bread and wine, was not much different. Who in the world can explain what "in, with, and under" means? The Reformed view (Zwingli) that Christ is present in this sacrament to those who *believe* he is, makes more sense. Yet even this does not explain the significance of Holy Communion in Christian worship. S. D.'s personal explanation was much simpler. The image of the table, as opposed to the image of an altar, is the key to understanding what the sacrament is about. "An altar is a place where you go to give something," he said. "A table is where you go to receive something, and the fellowship of those who gather around the table is the most important thing about it." This is what gives Holy Communion its special meaning. We go to Communion to receive, in fellowship with each other, that which is given—the love, forgiveness, and peace of God.

For some pastors in the Danish church, the sacrament viewed in these terms was considered dangerous and definitely not Lutheran.

Their criticism, however, and the charge they brought against S. D., grew out of his liturgical practice, not out of his stated or written views. For when S. D., acting as officiant at Communion, distributed the bread and wine, he did not say, as the rubric in the Danish Altar Book required, "this is the body of Christ, this is the blood of Christ." No, S. D. left out the word "is" and said, instead, when giving the bread: "Christ's body," and, when giving the wine, "Christ's blood." One pastor took offense at this and wrote in the official periodical publication of the church (*Kirkelig Samler*) that S. D. Rodholm was promoting, indeed teaching in the seminary, a view of Communion that was definitely not Lutheran, and he should be called to account for this.

The matter came to a head at the 1941 convention of the church in Troy, New York. I was present and recall what happened. One day, on the convention's agenda, time was allowed for S. D. Rodholm to respond to the charge that had been made against him in *Kirkelig Samler*. When the precise moment for this arrived; however, S. D. stood up and said he would gladly explain his views, but since he was scheduled to be the convention's evening speaker, he would prefer to use that time to clarify his stance. The convention agreed this would be acceptable, though a few pastors were disappointed, because now they would be unable to engage him in debate. To satisfy them to some extent, at least, S. D. then and there explained his omission of the word "is" when distributing the elements of Communion. He said he first heard the form "Christ's body, Christ's blood" used by a bishop of the Church of Denmark, and he liked it so much he decided that henceforth he himself would use it, as indeed he had for many years. I do not recall precisely what S. D. said in his talk at the convention's evening meeting. What I do recall is that he used Grundtvig's hymn "O Kristelighed" as his text, and my impression, as much of it as remains, is that with this text as his base, he made a passionate presentation of Grundtvig's Christian/human (theological) view of life. Afterwards, and at the convention's session the next day, there was no further discussion regarding S. D.'s simple yet "radical" view of Communion.

For me, the stanza that most strongly supports S. D.'s view of the Eucharist is the one written in Grundtvig's hymn "Mindes vi en fuldtrø ven:"

Naar da om dit Nadverbord

Trindt og tæt vi tage sæde

*Med den tro, at i dit ord
Du er sandelig tilstede,
Mindet gløder i vort bryst,
Har paa tungen englerøst.*
(When we gather around the board,
The sacrament to take,
With the faith, that in your word
You truly are present,
The memory glows in our breast,
And angel voices fill our mouths.)

I know of nothing more Lutheran, more Grundtvigian, or more Christian than that.

It is said that S. D. Rodholm and other leaders in our Danish church spent too much time squabbling. Perhaps that is so, but S. D. and those other leaders were what they were. They knew where they stood. They were not afraid to be different. They did not hesitate to speak up. They did not worry about being popular. Their differences in theological matters and in liturgical practice were never so great as to tear them apart. Whether one was a conservative Lutheran, a less conservative Lutheran, a liberal, or a radical thinker, there was room in the church for everyone. One knew one belonged! When our church merged to help form the Lutheran Church in America we lost something. Only little by little, as our former congregations were “taken over” by pastors from outside our tradition, did we begin to realize how much we had lost. These “new” pastors were often totally insensitive to our past. A number of them, because they were Pietists or high church prancers, had no use for our theological thought and no understanding of our low church liturgical practice. Our Grundtvigian philosophy regarding the essential goodness of human life was incomprehensible to them. We tried through the Danish Interest Conference to correct this and failed. Thus, another merger came along. Two church bodies with differences in ecclesiology were brought together. The ELCA was formed, and nothing since has worked very well. Can this organized monstrosity we’ve made be fixed? I don’t know and it doesn’t matter much to me personally. I am now among the retired ones and therefore “on my way out.” Perhaps something was gained when the ELCA was formed. Certainly we are not part of the Ameri-

can church scene. We are no longer Danish or European transplants. And yet—I miss S. D., Arild Olsen, Alfred Jensen, V. S. Jensen, J. C. Aaberg, Johannes Knudsen, Ernest Nielsen, Enok Mortensen, Ejnar Farstrup, and many others, not to forget the many lay people who helped to give us our identity and our strong, strong sense of community. If only our children and our children's children could experience something similar and be as richly blessed. Perhaps someday in the ELCA, and if not there in some other church, a regeneration of life and spirit will emerge. Let us hope so!