

Professor Georg Sverdrup

Biblical and Church-Historical

Sketches and Addresses

Edited by

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With an Introduction by Wilhelm Petersen

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Editorial Sigla.—

Notes marked “—Ed.” originate with Andreas Helland, editor of the 1910 volume.

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1 Preface

It is now two years since Professor Georg Sverdrup entered into the joy of his Lord. His day of labor in this land extended over a period of thirty-three years. Throughout all this time he worked diligently and untiringly, with mouth and pen, for the quickening and liberation of mankind. During these years he took part in an exceedingly long series of contributions to the various ecclesiastical and churchly questions that stirred men's minds.

The feeling of the heavy loss and the bitter sense of deprivation gradually found expression among many in this wish: If only he had still had time to review and publish, in collected form, a selection of what he had made public in the course of the years, and likewise to revise and publish his theological lectures! — But for this he had no time. He was worn down by labor, felt himself one day more than ordinarily unwell, and the next morning the flag of mourning waved over the school to which, for a generation, he had devoted his best powers.

When the deceased's son, Professor George Sverdrup, Jr., requested me to take steps to collect and, if possible, publish a collection as complete as might be of the departed teacher's writings, I did not think it right to decline, although I already then felt something of the responsibility connected with it and foresaw the difficulties it would entail.

It already presented its difficulties to find the material. A large part of what Professor Sverdrup wrote appeared in the form of treatises and articles in our religious periodicals. But there are very few who have sufficient interest and forethought to preserve such papers from year to year. There are, however, one or two who have kept these old journals, and it is through them that I have succeeded in finding—so far as I am aware—all that has ever been published from Professor Sverdrup's hand. To all those who in this way have rendered this work such valuable service, I herewith express my heartfelt thanks.

The preliminary result of the material thus collected is presented here as the first volume of a work whose final extent has not yet been determined, but which is at any rate intended to comprise at least five volumes.

As regards the publication, it is proper to call attention to the fact that no changes have been made except those of a purely orthographic and linguistic nature. I have believed it right, as far as possible, to make use of the form of language that was common before the very latest radical changes in our spelling, and which the author himself employed in the last years before his death. Thus all plural verb forms have been removed, etc. As concerns citations from the Old Testament, I have followed the translation that has been in use for many years, the so-called "new translation," whereas the author is seen in his citations to have used what was then the newest translation, namely the so-called "Ryve translation."

On the other hand, I do not consider it advisable that, in a work such as this, principled changes should be undertaken—something for which, moreover, there has been no ground whatsoever in the present volume. There may arise a question as to whether a treatise should be included or not; but there can be no question of altering a man's words when one no longer has any opportunity to ascertain how he himself, in such a case, would have altered them.

As to whether the introductory remarks that accompany each section, and the annotations added as notes beneath the text, are of any value, that will be for the kindly reader to judge. My concern has been, if possible, to make everything clear; and I have sought to avoid any danger of misleading. The notes beneath the text that are not marked “—Ed.” (the Editor) are by the author himself.

To the many—both my colleagues at Augsburg Seminary and others—who by counsel and suggestion, and by the interest they have shown in this work, have rendered me valuable help and encouragement, I herewith express my best thanks. In particular, Professor Wilhelm Petersen deserves thanks for the kindness he has shown in attempting an introduction to the work, as well as Professor J. S. Blegen for the many valuable suggestions he has given me again and again.

The portrait of Professor Sverdrup that accompanies this volume is his last, and was taken a few weeks before his death. His signature is a facsimile of his name as written on one of the diplomas he signed the day before his death.

I can only wish that this collection of Professor Georg Sverdrup’s writings may find so kindly a reception that our highly esteemed and deeply missed teacher, and our people’s and our church’s faithful friend, may through it continue to speak to us and to the generation that comes after us.

In a better way we could perhaps scarcely honor the memory of Professor Georg Sverdrup.

Augsburg Seminary, Minneapolis, Minnesota, May 3, 1909.

Andreas Helland.

2 Introduction

By Wilhelm Petersen.

My first attempt to portray Professor Georg Sverdrup's life¹ was written under the strong influence of the recent loss caused by his sudden death, and without any preparation other than the state of mind into which this naturally placed me, and without any other material to work with than the information I either myself possessed or could easily procure. It was a fluent and imperfect, yet nevertheless sincere and well-intentioned attempt to honor the man whom Augsburg and Kristiania without hesitation place in the foremost rank among the greater spirits and fine, well-formed personalities of the Norwegian Lutheran Church.

A worker of the Church—indeed, a man of the country who is deeply loved—whatever position he may occupy, provided he accomplishes something of real worth, has in his lifetime two difficulties to contend with. The first is that his person, his character, his gifts, his spiritual orientation, and his view of life are, and by the nature of the matter must be, misunderstood and misinterpreted, distorted and unjustly judged by those who happen to be his opponents. Certain traits in an opponent can of course always be acknowledged; but it is almost always the purely formal or phenomenal aspects, that which appears on the surface, such as courage and bravery, aggressiveness and fearlessness in the struggle itself, skill and perseverance in conducting it, strong will and energy, and whatever else belongs to all that which outwardly gives the struggle its purely phenomenal character. To the same category of one-sided and inadequate judgment belongs, naturally, also the overestimation by admirers, supporters, and devotees of the person and his distinctive gifts. There are always fundamental features in a struggle, and it often brings forth certain powerful traits in those who fight. There is always more or less spiritual agitation, which causes the conflict to be viewed from a distance and the judgment to become unjust.

The second difficulty is that what in reality is the significant, the essential, and the characteristic element in a person is concealed or pushed into the background by that which the person in question happens, at the moment, to need most. Professor Sverdrup stood, to a high degree, like many of the Lutheran Church's contending men, under both of these difficulties—despite a sober historical sense and a sound and just judgment of his person built upon it.

The remarkably brief introduction to Professor Sverdrup's Selected Collected Writings is an answer to a request that I write such an introduction, made to me by the publisher of the work, Professor Andreas Høiland, who himself, in his introductory remarks to the individual sections, has touched upon several points that properly belong to a biography, and whose clear and perceptive view of Professor Sverdrup's person and work will, to a considerable degree, help the untrained reader toward a more distant and comprehensive understanding of his life and the work to which he devoted it.

The publication of the work will moreover serve a twofold purpose: first, to refresh the

¹Professor Georg Sverdrup. A biographical sketch

memory of the man to whom the Lutheran Church in America owes so much; and second, to preserve for the congregation, in a more accessible and familiar form, the writings in which he set down the fundamental views upon which his entire ecclesiastical and popular work rested.

For the reasons mentioned in my first biographical attempt, it is still too early to write a biography of Professor Sverdrup that can place his life and his work in their proper historical context and apply the correct historical measure.

The purpose of this brief introduction is therefore only to emphasize what is essential in Professor Sverdrup's work, especially as it emerges over time in his posthumous writings, which in themselves form the most beautiful and enduring memorial of him.

A historical personality may be viewed from different sides. It may be seen in the light of the conditions and surroundings that outwardly condition its appearance in history. Or it may be seen in the light of the aptitude for a particular life calling, recognized through abilities and education. Finally, it may also be seen in the light of the efforts undertaken to attain a certain goal, to solve a particular task.

Taken together, these three elements constitute the complete and full presentation of the personality from a historical point of view, while at the same time casting light upon the complex of spiritual currents and labors upon which the life in question has exerted both transient and lasting influence.

If we then look—if only at the titles—at the written works that are here before us from Professor Sverdrup's hand and mind, we immediately gain the impression that we are standing face to face with a man who occupies himself exclusively with solid questions and tasks, both principled and practical. His spirit pressed downward and inward to that which acts as a driving force in the life of the Church and the congregation; or else to that which, as a historical result, revealed itself to his spiritual clarity of vision as a determining factor in the development of life, and from the recognition of which he never shrank back; or again to that which stood before his spirit as an ideal—radiant and full of promise, yet bearing within it the full content of prudence.

In this way I believe I have indicated what constituted the essential distinguishing mark of his rich intellect. He could never rest in the mere outward fact; rather, from that—which served as the given material for thought—he sought to return to the very essence, to the principle. And in this tireless search to find not only the true interconnection of things, but also their logical development from a principle firmly grounded in life, his entire scholarly orientation was revealed—one that was in all essential respects dialectical, that is, the method of Socrates as presented in Plato's writings. How he admired the sharp, incisive, ironic quality of Socratic thinking—the truth-content recognized by its own keen observation, built upon an uncompromising and prejudice-free gaze!

Richly endowed by nature and developed through the study of Greek philosophy—which he had assimilated in an entirely original way—he was thereby fitted, as few are, to untie historical knots and to cast light upon historical life, which his spirit sympathetically lived through and absorbed in the fullest measure. Thus his presentation gained life and color, in that he himself lived along with everything he depicted. It would be difficult to find a more

intimate balance between subjective and objective understanding and presentation.

But although he was scientific in his pursuit of truth, and although he possessed a rare power of exposition, he was nevertheless far too much of a fighting nature to settle into a purely formal recognition of truth or into a barren, dogmatic comprehension of results already attained. He did not merely work with the truth; the truth worked within him. And thus, in accordance with his entire temperament, he ranged beyond forms and formulas until he stood freely above the whole spiritual battlefield, where, like a field commander, he brought his heaviest artillery forward at the point where he saw the position most urgently required it. People easily misunderstand such a man. And if he is placed within what are commonly called “small” circumstances—where one must struggle against ingrained prejudices, where people’s narrower influences and self-interests render both friends and enemies, both supporters and opponents, cowardly, malicious, and wavering—then a rare strength of character is demanded, an almost unceasing vigilance, in order not to turn aside from the path once perceived as the one true way. Professor Sverdrup suffered under the difficulty of such a position to the same degree as many others who are endowed by nature with rare gifts and are called by God to wage the struggle of personality for truth and justice against complacency and class hatred, against indifference and self-interest.

And should one seek a clear, unmistakable testimony to the intensity with which he perceived this position of struggle, and at the same time to the clarity and sharpness of thought with which he was able to present his view, one could scarcely find anything better than the following brief piece, discovered among his papers and which was either a draft for a speech or an outline for a longer article. Any commentary is entirely superfluous. It is, however, fairly likely that he wrote this at a relatively young age. Both style and handwriting bear witness to that.

All hands on deck; draw the sword from the scabbard; let the cannon flash in the sun; strike upon the souls, that the sound of arms may be heard far across the land. The time is come; the air is heavy with thunder; let the thunder roll in the cloud and the lightnings strike with flash upon flash in the murk of night. The powers of the world are stirred; let the powers of heaven be stirred within us. God’s Church is in peril; let men girded with weapons guard her. Against the Lie we use sharp swords; against the Lie we bear shining helmets; against the Lie we take up bright shields. But the Lie is not outside God’s Church, but within her walls. Therefore awake, thou Christian Church, wherever thou art found; therefore awake, thou watchman of Zion, and sound the trumpet, that it may give a clear sound.

The Lie is this, that Christ is dead; for behold, He lives. The Lie is this, that Christianity is pure doctrine and the understanding of intellects and the clarity of thought; for behold, it is the life of love and the foolishness of love. The Lie is this, that the Church is an institution to rule over men; for behold, it is the home of freedom and the fellowship of the freed. The Lie is this, that the Church must employ the world’s falsehood and deceit in order to be cunning as the serpent; for behold,

she is the holy witness of truth and simplicity. The Lie is this, that the world is the Church's most dangerous enemy; for behold, it is the object of God's love. The Lie is this, that the Church is pure; for behold, she is full of rottenness and stench. The Lie is this, that Christianity is the world's hatred; for behold, it is the world's love. The Lie is this, that the Church must fear the world; for behold, the world is overcome. The Lie is this, that the Church must go outward to find her life; for behold, her enemy is in her midst. Let us find him where his work is among us; let us know him for what he is. Let us meet him as Christ once did: I am He whom ye seek.

"The truth in love" was perhaps as much as anything an expression of the whole direction of Professor Sverdrup's spirit.²

For such a man there was scarcely room in Norway in the seventies. But with the elasticity of spirit that was his own, he soon made himself at home with the thought of working among his people outside Norway. It is not the intention here to portray the profoundly world-embracing character of Sverdrup's understanding of Christianity and church work in contrast to that which prevailed in Norway at the time. He himself has portrayed this in masterly fashion in *Memories from Norway*, a work that must always form the point of departure for a fuller historical account of the reasons that brought Oftedal and Sverdrup to America. The justification of this understanding, and the correctness of these reasons, are testified to clearly enough by the subsequent ecclesiastical development in Norway.

All that remains is, in brief outline, to characterize the position into which Professor Sverdrup necessarily came when he thus tore himself away from the mother soil and "chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God" than to hold a comfortable position in a state church in which, according to his ecclesiastical convictions, he could not feel at home.

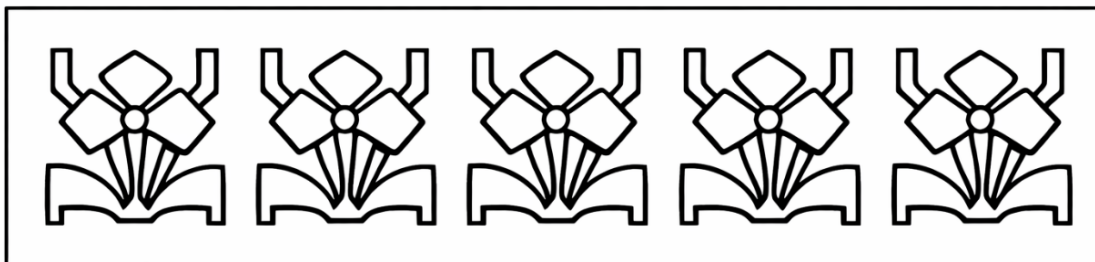
This position was essentially the same for the two men whose names in Norwegian-American church history are so closely bound together that it is possible to separate them only in a purely formal sense. Confronted with the emerging church life in the new land, these two men stood searching for a way to move beyond the old-fashioned, purely institutional conceptions. And both of them, with the burning zeal and driving force of youth, threw themselves into the work of building—indeed, we may just as well say founding—the Church upon the congregation.

This word, which together with freedom and spirit has been so terribly abused, casts light upon all the work that constitutes the key to understanding all the views that bear the name Augsburg Seminary. It was a struggle on all sides that these two men undertook and carried on. That they should be regarded as disturbers of the peace, as dangerous men, was something anyone familiar with similar historical phenomena must have expected. Nor did they in any way attempt to seek shelter from the attacks that were directed against them

²In this introduction, the editor's narrative voice has been rendered in contemporary English for clarity, while quoted material originating with Professor Sverdrup has been translated in a more elevated register. This reflects the contrast of tone present in the Norwegian original between historical exposition and exhortative prose.

from so many and varied quarters. That, moreover, only served to focus attention upon them all the more sharply. But it is neither too early nor too hasty—nor yet too late—to say here that these two men, whatever else may be said of them, represented an ecclesiastical vision and an ecclesiastical work that history has sanctioned.

Here it suffices to point to the writings of Professor Sverdrup that lie before us, which as clearly as any human presentation can express it contain two things: dissatisfaction with, and the inadequacy of, the old modes of thought and inherited forms; and the advocacy of a free and living congregation as the only foundation—both biblically and historically sound—for the building of a true kingdom of God on earth. For this Professor Sverdrup labored and fought; for this he suffered and died; and no one shall deprive him of the honor of having kindled a light in the Church upon which, even to this very day, many still look with joy and gratitude.



3 First Section

The three following biblical sketches will give, though doubtless only a faint impression, of why Professor Gederdrup's lectures on the Old Testament so powerfully captivated his hearers. The noble, poetic language, the thoroughly biblical tone, the holy reverence for the Lord's testimony as it came to His people through His preacher, were such prominent characteristics of this branch of his teaching that it seized the listeners in a peculiar manner and held them fast. When, with his clear gaze sharpened by the Spirit of God, he opened the Scriptures for his students and looked into the hidden depths of God's counsel, many a heart was made to burn. — Ed.

3.1 David and Jonathan

[Source: Svartal-Skrift for the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America. Edited by Prof. Gederdrup and Oftedal. Third Year. 1877. Pages 44–48. — Ed.]

This section appears on pages 1–5 of the original volume. — Present Ed.

And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.

The time seems to have come in which this word is being fulfilled. At a deep and fundamental level there stirs the unrighteousness of self-love, and it appears as though petty vanity and rending envy have become dominant, not only in the politics of this world, but also among those who call themselves by His name, who went into death for His friends.³ Even in the Church of God it seems that the gentle south wind does not blow, that wind which causes the flowers to give forth their fragrance in God's garden, but rather a cold, cutting winter snow, which causes the fairest plants to wither and the noblest shoots to die.

Therefore we will bring forth the loveliest image of the love of friends that we can find, and by it we will warm our own hearts. For though thou shouldest take the coldest thing thou knowest—though thou shouldest take death's cold mist⁴, wherein human hearts grow stiff

³Sverdrup's prose is woven like fabric held under tension and is best understood when read aloud. — Present Ed.

⁴The original text uses "Dødens kolde Taarning" While Taarning resembles the word for "tower" in this 19th-century context it functions as an archaic variant of taage/taaning (mist/fog). "Mist" better captures the intended metaphor of a chilling, numbing atmosphere that stiffens the heart. — Present Ed

and the blood congeals—yet love is strong as death. And where the fire of love burns, there it is of no avail that the wind blows and the waters stream over it; for every cold gust shall only cause the flame to blaze the more freshly upon the hearth, and the many waters cannot quench love. In tribulation it grows, in darkness it shines, in cold it is the warmer; the greater the conflict, the greater the courage; the more hindrances, the more glorious the outcome.

A young man, ruddy of countenance, comely of form and fair to behold, was David, the son of Jesse, from Bethlehem. Scarcely more than a youth among bleating sheep upon the pastures of Judah; over its hills and through its valleys he led his flock; his playing and his song sounded over the green meadows and by the murmuring brooks. His harp he had learned to tune by the rushing of the rivers and in the stillness of the forests, and the praise of the Lord he had learned to sing while he walked alone upon the field where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had pitched their tents with their flocks, in faith and expectation of the Lord's promise, that the land should be given unto them and to their children for ever.

The glorious inheritance of promise which had been given to the tribe of Judah had become the shepherd boy's inheritance, and by it he had been assured that Goliath of the Philistines was not to be feared by the people of God, but that the Lord would give His people victory over all their enemies, if they boldly trusted in Him.

Then came a day when the prophet Samuel went down, by the command of the Lord, to anoint one of the sons of Jesse to be king over His people; for Saul was rejected from before the face of the Lord. And Jesse brought forth his sons, one by one, before the prophet of the Lord. And the prophet said, when he saw Eliab: "Surely the Lord's anointed is before Him." But the Lord said: "Look not on his countenance, nor on the height of his stature; for I have rejected him: for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart."

And Jesse brought forth his seven sons, but none of them was chosen of God. Then David was lacking; he who kept the little flock had yet to come. And the Lord said unto Samuel: "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." And Samuel anointed him, and the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day.

But over Saul there was an evil spirit; and David was brought to Saul, and his pleasant playing was a refreshment and a restoring of life for the sick and torn heart of the man, and the evil spirit departed from him at David's playing. But Saul was rejected of the Lord, and David was chosen in his stead.

At this time the Philistines went up against Israel, and Saul summoned the host against them. And Saul had a son whose name was Jonathan, and he was a hero in war, and victory followed him against the Philistines, for he also had set his heart upon the LORD, and in the name of Israel's God he smote the enemies of Israel. Among Israel's heroes Jonathan was the flower, an ornament unto Israel, a joy and delight to the people of God. He was the king's son, and the people rejoiced in hope of the day when he should sit upon his father's throne.

Then came the great champion of the Philistines, the mighty Goliath, and set himself forth to single combat. And he reviled the armies of Israel, and he mocked their God, and there was none who dared to meet him. Fear and dread lay upon the whole host of Israel; but

David was not among them, for he went about upon the fields of Bethlehem and kept his father's flock. Yet he also would behold the Philistine champion, and he went to the camp; and the Spirit of the LORD came upon him. With a sling in his hand and smooth stones from the brook in his shepherd's pouch, he went against the champion in the name of God. And against the champion with sword and spear he set the LORD as his shield and defender, and the Philistine fell before the despised shepherd-boy of Israel.

Then there was jubilation in Israel, then the daughters of the people sang with gladness the praise of David. But a dark and hellish thought crept into the heart of Saul; envy seized him, and bitter hatred toward David, because the LORD had chosen him and given him the strength of faith, which was the true kingly adornment among the people of the LORD. But the heart of Jonathan opened itself toward the unknown shepherd-boy; his heroic spirit rejoiced in the heroic deed, his faith was strengthened by David's boldness of faith; he recognized the LORD's Chosen and loved him. And as brooks that meet in the valley, gently and silently glide together and cast themselves into one another's embrace, unable to do otherwise, so heart was bound to heart and soul to soul, when Jonathan and David found one another on the day of victory.

Saul's hatred and persecution brought, from that day onward, tribulation and distress upon David. It was the Lord's school of love, wherein the chosen king was to be prepared to become a true ruler of people and land. Thus, driven from the king's court, threatened with death, hunted from place to place like a wild beast, he no longer had any home, any resting place, save in the Lord's faithfulness and in Jonathan's friendship.

Jonathan sheltered him from danger; Jonathan warned him against his father's cruelty; Jonathan went to him in the forest and strengthened his hand in God. Jonathan defended him before his father, so that Saul, even in his fury, hurled his spear at his own son.

Was there anything for Jonathan to gain by such faithfulness to his persecuted friend? On the contrary, it seemed as though there was everything to lose. There were many bonds that surged against this love and would have quenched it, yes, even turned it into bondage to Saul. Temptation lay on every side for Jonathan to give way; yet in all things he was found faithful.

Saul, his father, was rejected by the Lord, and David was chosen in his stead. David was to receive Jonathan's inheritance; the son was to lose all because of the father's sin. Envy and wounded vanity might well have gathered bitterness in Jonathan's heart; yet his friendly mind remained at peace with this thought: David shall be the first in the kingdom, and I shall stand at his side.

Jonathan was the pride of Israel; now a shepherd boy was to go before him. He who had gone foremost in Israel's wars was to give way to one who had gone behind the bleating sheep. It seemed a bitter thought, but Jonathan found rest in the confidence that the Lord chooses whom He will to prepare His people.

Daily Saul's kingdom declined; daily Jonathan had to see faithfulness to Saul give way to the growing sympathy for David. David's nobility cast a heavy shadow over Saul's faithless course. Jonathan felt how it cut through the heart to see his father overwhelmed with shame; yet in all this he prevailed.

And David, who was hunted and persecuted, who was not deemed worthy to have even a cave in the land where Saul had his throne—his soul too was surely tempted to hate both father and son. He must have feared what Jonathan would do when Saul was dead. He might well have thought it better that the whole house of Saul were destroyed, if he were to have peace upon Israel's throne. There was temptation when he saw Jonathan alone and himself despised; there was temptation when he met him alone in the field, alone in the forest. Might he not think: "This is the heir; if he is gone, then the struggle is ended at Saul's death"? Yet in all this David prevailed.

Then came the final battle. The Philistines attacked Israel; Saul and Jonathan went out against them. Alone the friend went with his blinded father. He fought for the rejected one; he himself had nothing to gain thereby. For David's land fought Saul's son; for Saul's victory fought David's friend. But David was not at his side. The tumult of slaughter increased, and the struggle grew fierce; Jonathan fell in the unequal fight. But David's lament has borne Jonathan's name unto this day:

I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me; thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.

Why did Jonathan fight, why did David suffer?

For Israel's hope, which was greater to them than their own honor.

Thus the Lord bound hearts together in unbreakable friendship and rock-fast faith for His people and its hope.