

Rev. Friðrik J. Bergmann

By Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson

Friðrik J. Bergmann was one of Winnipeg's most influential ministers and scholars during the first two decades of the twentieth century. He once summarized his life philosophy by saying, "the greatest thing in life is to grow," and he exemplified that belief through the expanding horizon of his own life and thought.

Bergmann was born on April 15, 1858 at Garðvík, Svalbarðsströnd in Eyjafjörður, along the northern coast of Iceland, the son of Jón Jónsson Bergmann and Halldóra Bessadóttir. He was among the earliest Icelandic emigrants to North America when he joined the exodus in 1875, still just seventeen years old. He entered Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1881, and then studied for the ministry at Mount Airy Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Following a year of advanced studies in Norway, he returned to the United States in 1886 to take charge of the Icelandic Lutheran congregations in North Dakota. From his base in Gardar, he served nine congregations that spanned a fifty-mile radius, leading worship in as many as three different churches on any given Sunday!

When the Icelandic Lutheran Synod considered a proposal to affiliate with the General Council of the Lutheran Church in America, Bergmann was the leading advocate in favour of the move. Recognizing that the Icelandic Synod would come to rely on the seminaries of the General Council for its future supply of ministers and envisioning a Lutheranism in North America that reached across national groups, Bergmann was an enthusiastic champion. The synod referred the matter to a committee of three, which included Bergmann, but despite the committee's approval in principle for affiliation when it reported three years later, nothing came of the proposal during Bergmann's lifetime.

When the Icelandic Lutheran Synod launched *Aldamót* (Turn of the Century), an annual publication that included conference lectures, religious articles and ethical essays, Friðrik J. Bergmann was the natural choice to become its editor. In the fourth year, he added a book review section, "Under the Linden Trees," which grew from fifteen pages to fifty during the remaining years of the publication. From its premiere issue in 1891 until it ceased publication in 1903, *Aldamót* betrayed the growing liberalism of its editor, who had commenced his ministry as the Synod's most conservative clergyman but ended up as its most radical.

After the Lutheran church at Selkirk followed its minister, Magnús J. Skaptason, out of the Icelandic Lutheran Synod in 1891, the minority that remained faithful to the

synod organized a new congregation in 1893. They issued a call to Friðrik Bergmann, who served as pastor for the following year. Both congregations claimed the existing building and each one padlocked the doors to prevent the other from using it! Eventually, a financial understanding was arrived at and Bergmann's congregation took sole possession of the church.

In 1894, Bergmann returned to Iceland for a year, where he apparently came under the influence of the liberalizing currents of the state church, where several of the leading churchmen had embraced what was called the New Theology.

In 1901, Bergmann was appointed lecturer in Icelandic at Wesley College, one of the predecessor colleges of the University of Winnipeg. His salary of \$1,000 a year was paid entirely by the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod, while the college retained two-thirds of the student fees! (Since tuition was thirty dollars at the time, this meant that, even in the best year, the Synod did not recover even half of its expenditure.) In addition to teaching Icelandic subjects – grammar, poetry, mythology, history and geography – Bergmann also taught high school Latin, which made for quite a course load! According to A.G. Bedford, he was “respected as a scholar of wide learning and a kindly disposition.” Enrolment in the program grew from fifteen in 1901 to forty-eight in 1909, when the number of students peaked. From the turn of the century to the outbreak of World War I, approximately one-half of the Icelandic students at Wesley College graduated with medals or equivalent honours, including two Rhodes Scholars! Bergmann's tenure as lecturer in Icelandic ended in 1909, presumably because of his break that year with the Icelandic Lutheran Synod, although the public explanation given was that he was “obliged to retire by the growing demands of his pastorate.” Whether he resigned or was dismissed remains unclear but, either way, he was pushed!

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Bergmann emerged as the leader of the New Theology movement among the Icelandic Lutheran churches. At the annual conference of the Icelandic Lutheran Synod in 1901, he delivered what could be called the manifesto of the New Theology, an address entitled, “The Letter and the Spirit.” In it, he argued against the literal interpretation of the Bible, maintaining that it was the spirit or essence of the text that was eternal, not the text itself. As he further developed his New Theology, he asserted that the creeds were historic milestones in the development of the church but not binding upon it, that freedom of thought and conscience were central to the Christian heritage, and that “truth withers in the possession of those who think they have a monopoly on it.” Today, such ideas are largely accepted by mainstream Christian theologians but, at the beginning of the twentieth century, they were fighting words. Jón Bjarnason, the president of the Icelandic Lutheran Synod and Bergmann's former mentor, dismissed the New Theology as antithetical to Christianity and nothing more than disguised Unitarianism.

Bergmann launched a new periodical, *Breiðablik* (Broad View), in 1906 to promote the New Theology. At first, its pages were devoted primary to the controversy between Bergmann's position and the synod's response to it, but, in time, *Breiðablik* devoted increasing attention to literary and cultural interests. Like several other publications, *Breiðablik* ceased publication after the outbreak of World War I.

The controversy within the synod raged on for eight years. As the conflict escalated, those adhering to a more orthodox understanding of faith sought to deprive Bergmann of his lectureship at Wesley College, since this position was sponsored by the synod. He and his supporters argued that, if his position was heretical, he should be expelled as a minister rather than removed from the faculty of the college, since his academic post was a secular one. At the annual conference of the Icelandic Lutheran Synod in 1909, the New Theology was rejected by a vote of forty-nine to twenty-seven. Bergmann led nine congregations (out of thirty-five) to withdraw from the synod, including the Winnipeg Tabernacle, which had affiliated just four years earlier after a decade and a half as an independent congregation. The synod lost more than a quarter of its members through this exodus.

The Winnipeg Tabernacle prospered under Bergmann's leadership and, in 1912, construction started on a magnificent new church on Victor Street, just south of Sargent Avenue. When the new church was dedicated on the eve of the First World War, Bergmann was at the height of his influence in the city.

In 1916, Bergmann and Rögnvaldur Pétursson, the leader of the Icelandic Unitarians, initiated talks to merge their congregations into one. Ironically, Bergmann had been one of the leading opponents of Unitarianism during his pastorate in North Dakota! The merger was accomplished in 1920, two years after Bergmann's untimely death, but not before considerable attrition had occurred in the Tabernacle's membership. A minority from the Tabernacle refused to go along with the amalgamation, which led to a protracted legal dispute over the Tabernacle's property on Victor Street. After a five-day trial that pitted two of Winnipeg's leading lawyers – Hjalmur A. Bergman and Joseph T. Thorson – against one another, the courts ruled in favour of the minority, ignoring the obvious will of both the majority of the congregation's membership and its deceased minister. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that politics and influence had more to do with the court's decision than did law and the evidence.

Bergmann was married to Guðrún Thorlacius in 1888, a year after she emigrated to America. The daughter of Magnús Thorlacius, a minister in Skagafjörður, and Guðún Jónasdóttir, she was described as "a lady of culture and education," whose "charm as a hostess was exceptional."

In addition to countless essays and articles, Bergmann published four books: *Ísland um Aldamótin* (Iceland at the Turn of the Century, 1901), *Vafurlogar* (Flickering Flames,

1906), *Vidreisnarvön Kirkjunnar* (The Church's Hope of Revival, 1911), and *Trú og Thekking* (Faith and Knowledge, 1916).

On April 11, 1918, Bergmann was struck and killed by an automobile while crossing Sherbrook Street. Fittingly enough, the epitaph on his grave reads, in Icelandic, *sannleikurinn mun gjöra yður frjálsta* – “the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). Whatever else may be said about him, he followed his understanding of the truth wherever it led and, in word and deed, sought to embody that truth in his own life.

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