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Contents

Page

EDITORIALS

Unrest in Synod..... 1

Are We Communicating?..... 2

Philip Melancthon (1497-1560)..... 3

LECTURES ON PREACHING..... 4

Faris D. Whitesell, Chicago, Illinois

NOTES ON EUROPEAN LUTHERANISM..... 15

Martin J. Naumann, Professor, Old Testament

REVIEW: "THE PASTOR AT WORK"..... 25

H. M. Schwehn, Fort Wayne, Indiana

BOOK REVIEWS..... 30

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Notes on European Lutheranism

During his recent sabbatical, Professor Naumann served on a visitation of European churches affiliated with and supported by the Missouri Synod. In the last decade he has also participated in numerous "Bad Boll" conferences with European theologians. Prior to that he was pastor in Hamburg. From this rich background, he has recorded his impressions of the theological scene in Germany today.

MARTIN J. NAUMANN

DRIVING through the European countries, particularly on the old side-roads instead of on the new highways, one has time to meditate on the reason for the twists and turns in the road. At times there are turns and twists one can't explain except perhaps by saying: "This was an old cowpath, later used by people, then by men in vehicles . . . Nice big trees have grown to the left and to the right of it, and it would be a shame to straighten out this road between Guggelhausen and Bebbendorf . . ."

Studying the theological scene in Europe, especially in Germany, we are faced with old and established traditions, customs, lingering confessional currents, national or local histories that all have had their effect on the course taken, growing up along the church's historical path, so that a radical straightening out would mean the cutting down of many accepted and ancient traditions. We met this explanation—we won't say "excuse"—frequently when discussing the possibilities of a break with traditional state church customs: "*Wir können aus unserer historischen Situation nicht heraus!*" We can't escape our historic situation . . . And it is true that tradition and history play a much more weighty role in the churches of Europe than we, who know only the theological scene in America, can imagine.

Even to describe in outline the various traditions would be impossible in less than a 300-page volume. There are now, after all, in Germany alone twenty-eight churches, United, Lutheran, and Reformed, who, according to their province or *Land*, have their own history and, to some extent, type of confession; and, of course, also their own constitution. All of them are well-organized. We find no disorder. There are many intelligent and highly trained leaders, theologians, pastors, and laymen active in these churches. In fact, the organization of these churches is that which, together with their institutions and buildings, appears as *the church* . . .

To attempt to evaluate all these on the basis of a few contacts would be foolish. They, nevertheless, all have some similar characteristics. They partake to a great extent of the character of the state church, although the actual ties with the government are not the same as they were before World War I. They lean on the support of the people who pay church dues in the form of church taxes, usually computed on the basis of the amount of income tax paid, e.g., eight to ten per cent of that amount is added to the income tax for church purposes. This is usually collected by the government. An increased income or higher standard of living increases the income of the church. The "*Wirtschaftswunder*" of the post-war Germany has given the churches a lot more money than they have had for a long time. Since most of the people of a province belong to the church, all except those exempt from income tax pay church tax, which with some people amounts to just a few dollars annually, but in the case of a successful business may run into many thousands per annum. Thus the churches still are at an advantage, at least financially, compared to the small Free churches completely independent of governmental help or control.

But we are interested in the theological climate. To understand something of the background of the scene we meet we must summarize what has gone on in Germany during the 19th century.

A Difficult Heritage

Politically and ecclesiastically, the 19th century had to live with a rather difficult heritage. There was the unimaginable political separatism of the innumerable small states and, analogous to it and connected with it, the confessional divisions into a similar number of churches. (For example: there were 373 independent political areas—some so tiny, as for instance Guckenzell, which had to supply its ration of military men, figured percentually at three and one-half infantrymen and one-third cavalryman. For the churches, this may illustrate: there was a state church consisting of one superintendant and one pastor.*)

Later, in Bismarck's Reich, there were only twenty-eight state-churches. Concomitant with the union in political areas (after the

* Cp. Karl Heussi, *ABRISS DER KIRCHENGESCHICHTE*, 1957, Weimar, p. 172.

war for liberation—"Freiheitskriege") were the attempts to reform the relations between the Lutherans and the Reformed. The Festival of the Reformation 1817 was to effect a Union. We are familiar with the act of King Frederick Wilhelm III. The union was enforced in Prussia but the other larger provinces did not concur. The result of this action was an increased attention to the Lutheran Confessions, especially, when a new Agenda was to be forced onto the churches. The complexities of the debates and interrelations between churches who were truly "*uniert*" and those who agreed to be united with both the Lutheran and Reformed elements retaining their character, etc., can hardly be envisioned by our American churchmen used to rather simple organizations. The 19th century also saw the introduction of a synodical system. This took some of the authority from the political rulers and gave it to the churches.

The events of 1918 and 1945 changed things radically. No more "*summus episcopus*" in the person of the ruler. Instead the "Bishop" took whatever monarchical character the leaders of the church had. The bitter battle between the part of the church dominated by the Nazis and the part of the opposition, the "*Bekennende Kirche*", lost some of its significance during the critical war years. 1945 brought the end of the "Third Reich" and Germany had to reorganize in every respect. Also the churches had to do this. At Treysa, 1945, the leaders of the churches met. The EKD (EKID) with a council of twelve members was formed.

It was at this time that our own church leaders contacted the German Lutheran leaders, and a series of conferences, known in our Synodical Conference circles as "Bad Boll Conferences," took place, at which representatives of our church met literally hundreds of Lutheran professors and pastors every summer in series of meetings. This was the first real and informative contact which the theologians of the Missouri Synod had with Lutheranism in Germany. Not much of the modern German theological writings had been read in the United States since 1914. The first real contacts with the theology of Germany not only made evident that two kinds of German were spoken, but also that two types of theological language were spoken. The German theology proved to be confusing to the American Lutherans. Why? Because we were not aware of the theological development in Europe in the past one hundred years. The type of theological German-American was welcome to

the German pastors, few of whom could speak English. The type of theological language spoken by some of the German leaders was often hard to follow. In brief, American Lutherans had to learn to know and had to evaluate the situation in Europe.

What had happened? About the beginning of the 19th century the great majority of church people, the Protestant population of Europe in general, with the exception of some writers, were friendly to the church—the people of the lower estates more than the upper brackets. Even the rationalists were friendly to the church. There was an increase of respect for the church due to the French situation and the reaction of the romantics. Hegel presented a friendly agreement between philosophy and religion. After Hegel, his followers divided into a left and right wing. On the left were men like David Friederich Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach, whose opinions by way of some popular writers of the same school reacted to the general public at the same time as materialism and socialism drove a wedge between the people and the church. Marx and Engels did their work at the same time, and the concept that “religion is an opiate for the people” militated against the churches. Positivism, a philosophy which either would make no statements on the existence of God or deny it categorically, with Darwinism, evolutionary philosophy, Haeckel’s writings, etc.—all were attacks on the “simple-minded” church members who still believed the Bible to be the Word of God. . . . Came Schopenhauer, Nietzsche; came new “ologies” like psychology, sociology, anthropology, phenomenology and, finally, existentialism.

All these developments took place practically in the church. Men, members of the church who served as philosophers, scientists, theologians, notwithstanding the vow of ordination, were not held by their church to teach, preach and confess according to the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. Certainly the most blatant attacks on the Word of God were answered now and then, but in general it was, and is today, a part of the hard-to-overcome tradition that doctrinal discipline cannot be practiced. As long as the church as an organization was not threatened and its leaders were obeyed, no discipline was thought necessary. Accordingly, Bultmann, as an example, continues to teach. This is, of course, a very much generalized sketch of conditions. It may be added that academic and scientific theology is not much concerned with *Seelsorge*. That subject is not part of the university training.

Tenor of Theological Thought Today

One has the right to ask: “What about the many good things and excellent studies and books that come from Germany especially from the theological sector? What about the signs of a renewed interest in Luther and in the Confessions? Has the rationalistic past been successfully overcome? What is the tenor of theological thought today?” Among theologians today the question is not, “What does God say?” but, “What can man understand concerning God and His way of Salvation?” Higher criticism, never overcome, is so well established and entrenched that it is impossible to present one’s theology if one still is so backward as to believe in inspiration, especially if this belief takes the form of faith in a plenary or verbal inspiration. One of the leading theologians declared emphatically at one of the conferences on The Lord’s Supper that there was no point in talking together if the Missourians would insist on the use of the Bible as infallible source and guide. Naturally, the scientific attitude diminishes the value of the Lutheran Confessions. The first sentences of the Confessions to fall are the “condemnations” of the Confessions. From there this attitude forces the elimination of the Virgin Birth, The Lord’s Supper, even the doctrine of Justification by Faith. The ministry of the Lutheran Evangelical Churches is, however, not uniform in its evaluation of the Scriptures or the Lutheran Confessions. We met men who almost fully share the orthodox position on the basis of the Word of God and we know some, on the other hand, who have only the vocabulary of Lutheranism. But it is at times hard to distinguish between the two. They belong to the same churches, they worship in the same form, they attend the same conferences and belong to the same church federations. They seem to follow a similar practice in the administration of The Lord’s Supper. The subscription to the Confessional writings is still demanded of all entering the service of the church. This, however, is done largely to preserve the legal character of the church as a “Lutheran” church.

There are some other aspects of the situation in Europe. There is the renewed research in Luther. There is the fact that the liturgical development of the German churches is advanced beyond anything we have. There is the effect of Barth’s theology which has called many back to the Scriptures. There is a decided opposition to the extremes of the existentialist philosophy of Bultmann and his followers. There are, above all, the developments of the very con-

servative "Bruderkreise" who are so straightforward in their theological criticism of the church that one marvels that they are permitted to exist within the system of the churches. There is hope in such a movement. Such men individually practice church discipline and watch over their members in the use of the Lord's Supper, hitherto an unheard of practice in the *Landeskirchen* . . .

Some Trees Must Fall

What should our hopes and prayers be? Outside of the fact, that the small Lutheran Freechurches, not under discussion here, must be the leaven, to whom God may give the power of greater influence, we can only hope and pray that the men of the *Landeskirchen* will liberate themselves from the historical and traditional bonds which have been a detriment to the church. In other words, some of the trees will have to fall, if the road is to be straightened. The peoples' church is a "Fiktion", a traditional view that is illusion. The fact that about 1,000,000 members are registered as Lutherans in an area, e.g., Hamburg, does not mean that there is a strong church there. We see some strength in the "Kerngemeinden", churches within the church. These are members who attend fairly regularly and want to be Lutheran. But the church will not dispense with the other great majority that is actually unchurched. The church feels it has to serve these, but serves only when and if these members ask the pastor to serve at baptism, confirmations, weddings, and funerals. The statistics of the large congregations prove that not even three per cent of the members of some congregations attend on an average of even one time a year at the Lord's table. The obligatory and traditional attendance of a whole relationship at the time when a boy or girl is confirmed makes up quite a share even of that low percentage. That the theologians themselves on the other hand cannot agree on anything in regard to The Lord's Supper except on some compromising statements, shows the reason for this condition within a church called evangelical or Lutheran. A true Lutheran church must know what it is—not a geographically-embraced number of citizens but the communion of believers who gather about the signs of the church, the Word and the Sacrament.

We would wish that the concern for the truth and nothing but the truth of God's Word would motivate the churches to elim-

inate from their membership even some of the "important" members, some of the heretic teachers and professors who are eminent scientists, but hardly could be considered guardians of the church's life and doctrine.

The Ecumenical Movement

But these pious wishes seem doomed to disappointment because of the movement that seems the strongest element in Protestantism today, the ecumenical movement. Where there is no confessional fortitude but only theological latitude the move to unite can hardly fail to make an impression.

For the "ecumenical" tendency of our time had its organizational evidence also in Germany after the recent war. For three years (from Treysa, 1945, to Eisenach, 1948), three very divergent types of "churches" met and labored. Each point of view attempted to dominate the planned federation. The result was a compromise. The "Grundordnung" of the EKD although claiming to be a federation and not a church, nevertheless in the preamble states: "Foundation of the Evangelical Church in Germany is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as it is given to us in the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments" (transl. from the German, Cf. Heinz Brunotte, *Die Grundordnung der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland*, 1954). The preamble, however, also states that for the understanding of the Scriptures and of the ecumenical creeds, the confessional writings of the various churches or congregations are valid ("massgebend"). Although this was not to be a church, and although in general there was to be no altar-fellowship between these churches in the EKD, yet in view of the post-war situation and the needs of refugees it was suggested that "love" required the admission of members of other confessions to Lutheran altars. In the meantime, it can be noted here, efforts at arriving at a joint declaration in the doctrine of The Lord's Supper resulted in the "Arnoldshainer Thesen", which themselves have led to renewed debates. The theses were a compromise and were interpreted by each of the contending groups in their own way. They were published in a booklet, *Zur Lehre vom Heiligen Abendmahl*, with an introduction by G. Niemeier, who sketched the course of the talks from 1954-7, and with significant commentary by H. Gollwitzer, W. Kreck, and H. Meyer. The three men, each illustrating the theses according to his understanding of them, made evident the character of the theses as an attempt

at compromise . . . (*Zur Lehre vom Heiligen Abendmahl*, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, Muenchen, 1959). These theses were the subject of debate at a number of the "Bad Boll Conferences" in the summer of 1959.

Before the EKD was constituted in 1948 (to be exact, five days before), the VLKD constituted itself . . . not so much in order to block the formation of the EKD, but rather to establish the character of the EKD as a federation and to affirm the confessional character of the churches of the Lutheran conviction. Three of the thirteen Lutheran churches within the EKD are not members of the *Vereinigte Ev. Luth. Kirche in Deutschland* (VELKD). We cannot avoid the impression that the membership of Lutheran churches in the EKD is real church-membership, although the EKD claims to be only a federation. In practice there is little distinction made between the various churches, for instance in the question of altar-fellowship. Protests of the VELKD against member churches, as against the "Pfaelzer Landeskirche" which established altar fellowship with the English Congregationalists, were of no avail. (Cf. *Was ist mir der Kirche?* by H. L. Poetsch, Feste-Burg Verlag, Oldenstadt, 1959). The theological scene is muddled and presents no real hope for a decided confessionalist attitude. The opinions on the meaning of the Arnoldshainer Theses were, to cite an example, not divided according to Lutheran, Reformed, or Union theologians, but, as Gollwitzer points out in his commentary on the Theses: "dass es sich in keinem Stadium um einen Dissensus gehandelt hat, bei dem DIE Lutherischen DEN reformierten Partnern gegenuebergestanden waren, sonder immer um Differenzen, bei denen auch Mitglieder gleicher konfessioneller Tradition (im besonderen der lutherischen) einander widersprachen." Briefly: in the arguments on the Theses the differences were not divided according to Lutherans and Reformed but were evident especially among Lutherans. (Cf. *Zur Lehre vom Heiligen Abendmahl*, p. 20). A very good and detailed analysis of these theses is presented by August Kimme in *Der Inhalt der Arnoldshainer Abendmahlthesen* (Lutherisches Verlagshaus, Berlin, 1960).

It is the confused and contradictory character of the theological scene that causes church members and church leaders to look for a cure of the "sinful divisions", as they have been called, among

churches. Since the hope for an agreement on even the most fundamental principles of the Evangelical Church is so slim the leaders and the people look for a more evident sign for the confessed unity of the Church. . . . The envious glances at the solidarity and magnitude of the Roman church lends impetus to the movement falsely called the "ecumenical" movement. How far, however, principally also the Lutheran churches of the world are from uniting on a Scriptural and Confessional basis can become evident when one studies (reading will not be enough) a book like that of Ernst Kinder, *Der Evangelische Glaube und die Kirche* (Lutherisches Verlagshaus, Berlin, 1958). For the appeal Dr. Kinder makes for true ecumenicity on the basis of the true signs of the Church, the Word and the Sacraments, is so far from what the general policy of the churches, that this excellent study may have, we regret to say, as little result as had Werner Elert's book on *Abendmahl und Kirchengemeinschaft*, (Lutherisches Verlagshaus, Berlin, 1954). The tidal waves of ecumenicity, with their publicly demonstrated "get-togetherness" are not washing away any of the organizational structures of churches, but by their tremendous pressure tend to obliterate and wash out the last confessional consciousness found within the framework of these ecclesiastical structures. The organizations as skeletons will outlast the living congregations. The true members of Christ's Church will find themselves dispersed, living in the hope and promise of their Lord, that, in spite of divisions and offenses here, the true spiritual unity will be evidenced in the adherence to the signs, the Word and the Sacraments, and will finally stand revealed in that day when the works of men's hands will perish. Uniting on the basis of Scripture is God's will; uniting without this agreement on Scripture's teaching is much easier, but has no promise from God.

The Lutheran Free Churches

In this situation in Europe the position of the brethren of the Free churches, meaning the Lutheran Free churches in fellowship with members of Synodical Conference, presents more than just a bright spot. The theologians of these churches, though numerically not comparable to the ministerium of the other Protestant churches have the advantage of having experienced the impact of liberal theology both in their training—many are university men—and in their struggle for the preservation of the genuinely Lutheran church in Germany. As was the case with our own Missouri men,

these too were brought in closer contact with the German pastors by the conferences after the last war. Their training and experience in such close proximity to the churches in Europe and their staunch defense of the Lutheran Confessions for more than a century gives them a more thorough understanding of the problems to be faced. The seminary at Oberursel and its small staff can and does exert a theological influence far beyond that indicated by the number of professors and students. The *Lutherischer Rundblicke*, bringing theological discussions on a par with theological literature of the much stronger churches, has been noticed by both the Protestant and the Roman world. The Free churches may be at a point where they can support their own congregations without the financial help of American churches. As to the seminary in Oberursel, however, we must see that it is of such significance to the Lutheran world that the sister-churches in the world, who recognize the strategic position, must support the institution with fervent prayers and material help wherever possible. The work of the men in Europe will have to give us guidance in the evaluation of the theological developments at least till we have sufficiently caught up with scientific theology to fight the trend toward ecumenical dissolution everywhere.