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Lutheran Sidelights in English History

By E. GEO. PEARCE *

WHEN Lutheran pastors from all over Great Britain met recently for their Third Annual Conference at Wistow Manor in England, it brought to mind certain facts in seventeenth-century English history which are of interest to Lutherans. The seventeenth century was the end of a period of transition from the absolutism, civil and religious, of medieval Roman Catholic England to the constitutional monarchy and religious toleration of modern Protestant Britain. It was the era of the Stuart kings with their reactionary leanings toward Romanism as the form most likely to maintain absolute monarchy. It was the century of that strange Puritan Oliver Cromwell, who was as convinced as any Stuart king that his every act was right because it was identical with the will of God, and who, though his ideas on religious toleration were in advance of those of most men in his age, would yet allow no one but Puritans to have a share in the government. It was the time in which the Pilgrim Fathers fled England and sailed for America in their little ship, the *Mayflower*. It was the age in which two incompatible systems of religion — Anglicanism and Puritanism — strove for mastery against each other, each of them using every afforded opportunity to bring in oppressive legislation to crush the other. And it was this seventeenth century which saw Lutheranism established in Great Britain. The following is an account which connects especially the two Stuarts, Charles I and Charles II, with the history, early and modern, of Lutheranism in Great Britain.

HEADLESS CHARLES I AND MODERN LUTHERANISM

Wistow Manor is a quiet, old country house in England's Midlands, only a few minutes' drive from the bustling city of Leicester, center of Britain's hosiery industry. It was here that Charles I found refuge for a night after the Battle of Naseby in June, 1645, when his army was cut to pieces by the Roundheads under Oliver Cromwell. Nothing remained of the royalist forces but the cavalry, and with it the defeated King roamed aimlessly around the country. At Wistow Manor Charles

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had friends whom he could trust. Making his way there, he stayed overnight, exchanged his royal steed and beautifully fashioned saddle for those of a common cavalryman, and rode forth. Giving himself up to the Scots, from whom he expected better treatment, the hapless King was turned over to the Parliament of Cromwell and then, by as solemn a piece of play acting as ever degenerated an English court of justice, was sentenced to death and beheaded on January 30, 1649. Wistow has not forgotten her royal guest: the ornate saddle of Charles still hangs in the great hall, and every year on the anniversary of Charles' execution it is said that the headless royal ghost appears, bearing his head under his arm.

It was three days after the 301st anniversary of Charles' death that some thirty Lutheran pastors gathered at Wistow Manor for the first of a two-day conference. These pastors had no wish to bring back ghosts of the past. The legend of Charles' annual return is only a myth, but the tragedy that lies in the past for most of these Lutheran ministers and the people they serve is cruelly real. Ghastly shades of forcible ejection from their homes, separation from families, concentration-camp existence, life as wandering DP's, are far too recent to be easily forgotten by the tens of thousands of displaced Lutherans and their pastors who are now finding refuge in this old country whose proud tradition it is never to turn back an exile or refugee. In the quiet surroundings of thirteenth-century Wistow, the horrors of the past were put aside, and the mighty new challenge of rebuilding their churches in exile was eagerly discussed. Thirty-odd pastors in several varieties of broken English spoke of their great task of bringing the peace and security which comes of faith in Jesus Christ back into the disillusioned, unsettled lives of their people. They spoke for the 50,000 new Lutherans in Great Britain, the majority of whom have fled from the sinister terror that possesses Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Eastern Germany into the cities, towns, and villages of free Britain. After roaming, hungry and helpless, from one DP camp to another across the battered, unfriendly face of Europe, even the hostels of overcrowded England, where forty or fifty men sleep in a single room, were the promise of a new life. There is tragedy in the life of nearly all of these new Lutherans in England. The tales they tell are sometimes almost unbelievable. Most of them are professional people, as "intellectuals" deemed dangerous to the new regime of "people's government." The cruelty of the oppressor and the hovering prospect of being herded off to Siberian labour camps forced them to flee and to leave comfortable, settled lives behind them. They took

only what they could carry. Their homes, furniture, clothes, libraries, are back in the countries from which they have been exiled and to which they dare not return. In thousands of cases families have been separated with no chance of communication. To address a letter from England to one's brother or father in Latvia would be an act of folly. And now they are in England. British Ministry of Labour contracts allow them to work only in certain manual trades. So highly trained doctors, famed in their own countries for their medical skill, are today washing ward floors in British hospitals. A man known as the leading designer and contractor of public buildings in Riga now hoes weeds in a large nursery outside London. A Polish lawyer works as a common labourer in a glass factory. Another barrister, a Doctor of Laws from Slovakia, sells shoes. Such are the majority of the Lutheran people in Great Britain today. And the ministers who serve them? The same — penniless and stateless, their lives bruised and uprooted. A Lutheran pastor, now at Bristol, tells how he was evicted from office and exiled to Siberia, how he escaped, made his way down through the Khirgiz Steppes into Afghanistan, where he was imprisoned, and released at the end of the war, and how he worked for a time in Lutheran missions in India before coming to Great Britain. A Polish pastor, now in London, recounts his experiences: peremptory expulsion from office by the Gestapo, arrest and eighteen months in Dachau, forced labour in southern France, where he escaped and helped organize a Polish battalion in the French underground, two years as Chief Protestant Chaplain in General Anders' Polish Army, final transfer to England — the experiences of a dozen lifetimes crowded into six years from 1940 to 1946. These are the pastors who serve in the new Lutheranism of England today. Such are the people, such are the pastors who together are trying to re-erect their churches on English soil.

CHARLES II AND THE FIRST LUTHERAN CONGREGATION

Wistow Manor was still standing in the year 1660, when the monarchy was restored and Charles II was crowned king. The one and only experiment in British history of government without a king was over. Echoing the evident wish of the British people, the new Parliament began by declaring that the government is and ought to be by the king, lords, and commons — the form of government maintained in Britain to this day. The stringent Puritan Protectorate outlived its creator by only a few months. Eleven years after it had beheaded the father, Parliament proclaimed the son king. The Established Church, upon which the heavy hand of Cromwell had rested during the inter-

regnum, began to reassert itself and with royal support caused the enacting of a series of laws designed to make the Anglican Church the only legal church body in England. The Act of Uniformity of 1662 made the Anglican Book of Common Prayer the only legal service book and required every minister to accept the teachings of the Thirty-Nine Articles. An even more ruthless measure was taken two years later, when the Conventicle Act forbade under penalty of fine or imprisonment attendance at any religious service other than that of the Established Church. Still recoiling from the oppressive Puritan measures of the Protectorate, Parliament was not content even with this. In 1665, by the Five-Mile Act, non-Anglican ministers were forbidden to come within five miles of any corporate town, except on condition of swearing allegiance to the Established Church. The climax to all these vicious laws came in 1673, when the Test Act was passed, which compelled every public officeholder to receive the Sacrament according to the rites of the Church of England. This degrading use of the Holy Body and Blood constitutes one of the saddest chapters in the whole of church history.

This was the England in which the first Lutheran congregation was founded 281 years ago. The ruling government was determined to crush every other Church besides the Anglican. Heavy penalties were exacted from any clergyman or parishioner who dared worship in any but the prescribed manner. A writer of that time, Jeremy White, says that he collected a list of 60,000 non-conformist people who suffered through these laws during the twenty-eight years of the reigns of Charles II and his brother James II. Yet it was Charles II who in the year 1669 — at the height of this tyranny — granted a royal charter for the establishment of the first Lutheran congregation in Great Britain. This ancient document, which is still in existence today, expressly and “firmly ordered” the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of London, and all their successors to respect the rights of Lutherans and forbade any interference by secular or ecclesiastical authorities. The Lutheran Church in England may, therefore, justly claim that it was perhaps the first Free Church to be recognized by English law, and certainly the only one during those years from the Restoration to the “bloodless” Revolution of 1688.

Why did Charles II make this one startling exception? Certainly not because he favoured Lutheranism above the other non-established religions: Charles was always a Roman Catholic at heart. There were other reasons. The Great Fire of London, which raged unchecked for five days in the year 1666, destroyed the Anglican Parish Church of

Allhallows the Great, which had for years been the place of worship for Lutherans in London. This gave the merchants of the Hanseatic League, mostly Lutherans, the occasion to appeal to the King for the establishment of an independent Lutheran congregation. Funds were low in the royal treasury. An expensive war with the Dutch, coupled with the huge amounts of money needed for the rebuilding of the fire-gutted capital, two thirds of which had been destroyed by the Great Fire, would be a serious drain on the treasury. This gave the appeal of the rich and powerful Hanseatic merchants under the leadership of the Swedish ambassador, Leyonberg, a cash value to Charles. Furthermore, Britain was at this time in a military alliance with Sweden against the territorial aggrandizement of Louis XIV of France. The English King could ill afford to offend either these wealthy Lutheran merchants of London, who might have withdrawn their trade, or his Lutheran ally on the Swedish throne. Royal permission was granted, and England had its first Lutheran church.

This royal charter of 1669 is an interesting document. It states expressly that the congregation to be founded upon it was to be for Lutherans of all nationalities. In 1673 the church was consecrated in that ancient mile-square part of London known as the "City" on the site which is now occupied by Mansion House Underground Station. Its foundation charter declared that "Hamburg Lutheran Church," as it is called today, was open to any Lutheran group regardless of nationality or tongue. This international character of Britain's first Lutheran church is unique for its day. What promise it might have held out for the future of Lutheranism in Great Britain! The intervening years between then and now saw many other Lutheran churches organized in Great Britain, but in nearly every case the old emphasis upon a specific nationality, which seems to attach to Lutheranism, brought the Lutheran churches further and further from this original ideal. The Toleration Act of William and Mary in 1689 not only granted legal existence to the indigenous Free Churches, but also permitted by law, and not merely by royal prerogative, the establishment of Lutheran congregations. As a result, non-German Lutherans withdrew themselves and founded separate congregations, and the mother church soon became a purely German-speaking one. The ideal that twentieth-century Lutherans are striving for was a fact in Britain three hundred years ago, but how quickly this splendid international character was lost and Lutheranism began to fall into the specific national pattern it exhibits to this day in Britain.

At the Lutheran Conference at Wistow this problem of faith in

relation to nationality was energetically discussed. It was agreed that the task of Lutheranism in Britain today was not the perpetuation of a culture, but of a faith. The negligible influence of nearly three hundred years of Lutheranism in Great Britain can be traced to this weakness. In all its decades of existence in England the Lutheran Church had never been anything more than a group of foreign religious societies catering exclusively to foreign-tongued people. Certainly the Lutheran principle is the Pentecostal principle: Preach Christ to every man in his own tongue, but the object of the Church is Christ, not the language. Language is only a means, and when, in a new land, the native tongue ceases to be the ordinary medium of everyday speech, then it must give way to the language of the country. English was the language of the future for all Lutherans in Great Britain. History reveals that this was realized as far back as two hundred years ago by the pastor of one of the German Lutheran congregations in London. He tried to introduce English services, but his congregation protested so vehemently that the matter was decided by an English justice of peace, who ruled that the pastor had no right to do this.

This is a glimpse into the past of Lutheranism in Great Britain and a view of the people who will make the Lutheran Church of tomorrow. This is a picture of a Britain we hardly recognize: intolerant, prejudiced, harsh, and oppressive because she was torn between fiercely contending religious forces. In those restless, troubled times the Lutheran Church was founded. Today through the overruling providence of God, the terror of evil forces has brought new life and blood into the Lutheran churches of Great Britain. Elsewhere the Church is under attack. Persecution drives Lutherans into exile, and here in Britain out of the ashes of ravaged Continental churches a new Lutheran Church is arising. What sort of church will it be? At Wistow, in that old manor house where hapless Charles I spent one of his last restful nights, the 1950 Conference of Lutheran Pastors in Great Britain pledged themselves to a future that would approximate the ideal laid down in the royal charter of Charles II in 1669.