

THE SPRINGFIELDER

Vol. XXXII

Autumn, 1968

No. 3

THE SPRINGFIELDER is published quarterly by the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

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Springfield, Illinois

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Indexed in INDEX TO RELIGIOUS PERIODICAL LITERATURE, published by the American Theological Library Association, Speer Library, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey.

Clergy changes of address reported to Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, will also cover mailing change of *The Springfielder*. Other changes of address should be sent to the Business Manager of *The Springfielder*, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois 62702.

Address communications to the Editor, Erich H. Heintzen, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois 62702.

Evangelical Testimony At Sittensen

OTTO F. STAHLKE

Preparation in 1967

THE BERLIN CONGRESS on evangelism, at which even Haile Selassie appeared, was the inspiration for a rallying of the evangelical movements in European Lutheranism at Sittensen near Hamburg in February of this year. In preparation for this meeting Lektor Erik Petré, an emissary of the Swedish Bishop Bo Giertz, and *Pfarrvikar* Studer had visited all the leaders of the evangelical movements and had arranged a preliminary meeting at Sittensen under Pastor Peter Hartig, who shepherds the local stronghold of confession oriented Lutheranism.

The theme chosen for the 1968 assembly was "Revelation-Scripture-Church", because these key words best expressed the areas of concern and protest, in which the evangelical groups, called *Sammlungen*, wished to offer testimony to their churches. The purpose was rather to offer such testimony than to invite "modern" theologians to a debate. (Such a debate had been held at Sittensen in October 1964 between Walter Kuenneth and Ernst Fuchs on the resurrection of Christ). It was expressed that the projected assembly must be held without authorization by the leaders of the various state-related church bodies, even at the risk of their disfavor. It was therefore greatly appreciated that a Swedish bishop, Bo Giertz, consented to chair this assembly and was actively interested.

The discussion at the planning meeting revealed some of the provocations which moved the German and Scandinavian theologians to undertake this courageous step. Among these *gravamina* were the politicizing of the churches, the influence of existentialism, the toleration of modernists in the pulpits and in ecclesiastical offices, the efforts of church leaders to save the institution from schism at all costs, the mere role as functionaries of the pastors and members (evident in the decisions regarding the ordination of women), and the baleful influence of a prevailing modernistic university theology. Suggestions for overcoming these conditions were also offered: information to the congregations—perhaps in the form of good catechisms, seminars for students and members still active; services of repentance in all congregations; and the founding of their own theological seminaries. Such questions as the creation of free churches and the ordination of women were to be avoided at the coming assembly. The purpose should be to unite the evangelical movements and to prepare the way for organized testimony. The closing rally on Sunday should have the character of a mission festival rather than that of a service with Holy Communion; the latter would raise the question of open communion, while the former would offer the opportunity to hear worldwide reports on the critical situation in the church. One hundred and twenty theologians were to be invited, of whom it was hoped that one third could be from the

Scandinavian countries, so that the Scandinavians would not be too greatly outnumbered and appear as "an exotic marginal illumination" at the meeting in Germany.

I. *Theological Considerations, February 1968*

Lutherischer Rundblick (Oberursel) has reported extensively on the meeting at Sittensen, as has *Der Lutheraner* of the German Lutheran Free Churches. The antithesis is to be seen primarily in *Lutherische Monatshefte* (Hamburg). The *Sammlungen*, representing Sweden, Norway, Denmark, West Berlin, and the various Landeskirchen of West Germany are recorded under their statement below. Groups in Holland, France, and Austria were sympathetic but not in attendance. The Lutheran Free Churches in fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod were also represented.

Three morning sessions were devoted to hearing essays, the afternoons to discussion meetings of the theologians. Any report on these essays must necessarily be sketchy, based on very brief condensations. The complete essays, published by Pastor Peter Hartig, edited by Pastor Hans-Lutz Poetsch, are promised in early fall, available from the Verlagsgemeinschaft R. Brockhaus in Wuppertal and Stelten & Co., Bremen.

Sverre Aalen, the Oslo New Testament scholar, lectured on "The Revelation of Christ and Scientific Research". He stated that the revelation offered in the person of Christ and in the Word of Holy Scripture must be understood as a supernatural reality; that man deceives himself if he believes that he can attain to the knowledge of objective truth by the use of cerebration and research, based on reason and experience alone; therefore a historical-critical method of research cannot lead to an understanding of revelation unless it is applied within the framework of the faith transmitted by the church. Secular methods can be used in problems of archeology and geography, etc., as long as they are kept within the bounds characteristic of the auxiliary sciences.

Walter Kuenneth of Erlangen presented the theme, "Christology as a Problem Today". He emphasized that the ground of faith lies *extra hominem*, in God's saving acts. Faith is thus nourished by an antecedent event, which predetermines its content and is adequate to its purpose. Faith recognizes that God has intervened through Christ, a fact substantiated by the earthly witness given by Christ. Christology is therefore theology, for the encounter with Christ is an encounter with God. Historical criticism is able to determine matters of factual exactness; beyond that it cannot go. Theology must express itself in language conformable to the content of faith in order to show the unity of reality and truth in Christology. The application of concepts from pagan religions (Greek) or other sources must be subject to a reinterpretation in accordance with revealed theology. If old theological terms are exchanged for new to bring them into correspondance with contemporary language, they

must always be capable of retranslation into the New Testament witness. The possibility of a rational, empirical explanation of the New Testament witness is not granted. The commission of Matthew 28 means that the content of the good news is to be made intelligible to the man of every age.

Martin Wittenberg of Neuendettelsau treated "The Relation between History and Word in the Old Testament". His epigrammatic formulations, "Word becomes history", and "History becomes Word" do not attain the same clarity achieved by the other essayists. He stated "The Word is an effective, creative power; it not only announces history but creates it. We know the authors, who at times wrote *historia*. They made the effort to relate that which had occurred; but above all they strove to give a witness of the living God. Thus we have interpreted history which brings us to the contemporary problem. God is not only a super-historical reality, the Old Testament also expresses a relation between God and the world, between God and people. . . Every historian can describe the significance of religion in history, but he cannot say that God makes history . . . Problems in the history of Israel: since the reported facts and evaluations in part vary among the books, a unified statement cannot always be arrived at. 'When history became Word, it became words,' —yet they remain a symphony in the Old Testament." The discussion showed that those present made an issue of taking the Old Testament seriously. They asked: does the Holy Spirit work through "fiction", such as the Abraham stories have been declared by critics? What is meant by "a symphony of various theologies in the Old Testament?"

Joachim Heubach of Kiel read an essay on "The Spiritwroughtness and Historicity of Holy Scripture". He stated that even the scientific study of the Scriptures can be successful only under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; that the historicity of God in Scripture is a reality, which historical research can perhaps not at all perceive, for historical research is a hypothesis and works with hypotheses; that it must not be said that we cannot go deeper than historical-critical research; that the union of and the distinctions between *spiritus* and *littera* are analogous to the doctrine of the two natures of Christ; that the historicity and the Spiritwrought character of Scripture must be seen together.

Dr. Heubach distinguished four kinds of utilization of Scripture: 1. the scientific-exegetical, 2. the educational, 3. the liturgical, and 4. the private devotional. The last, which increasingly becomes the center of interest, he stated, is the true startingpoint for the other kinds of utilization of Scripture. From this it becomes clear that a proper study of the Spirit and of historicity are inseparable (Schlatter). What matters is that the Holy Spirit is the very Spirit of the Scriptures, not merely a complementary epistemological principle. Our acceptance of Scripture is truly ours, but when we "accept", a power has made itself evident in us, which does not proceed from us.

Karl Heinrich Rengstorf of Muenster lectured on "The Church Concept and Church Consciousness in the New Testament". Rengstorf offered an extensive discussion of the terms *ecclesia* and *qahal* and showed the distinction between the Greek and Biblical usage. The Old Testament *qahal* is an assembly created by God and placed into the world for His purposes. The New Testament translates this word with *ecclesia*. The local congregation is the local representative of the *ecclesia*; even the church in the home is so designated. The *kleetos hagios*, i.e., called saint, belongs to the *ecclesia*. Christ is the foundation. Everything that happened in Christ is not mythical, but factual. The central act of the church is the worship of God. The church does not exist for its own sake but for the world. The church carries out God's commission where strength and opportunity is given. This service includes *diakonia* within the wholeness (*Homologie*) of the church. It is not important what we make of the church, but rather that we acknowledge, what God wants to do through us. Where this recognition fails, the *diakonia* becomes social work, unrelated to the divine commission.

Annagreta Norén and Erik Petré discussed "Today's Tasks before the Universal Priesthood of Believers". In Sweden the question arises, what can women do who are trained as theologians, if the ministerial office is not open to them? The answer is found in the universal priesthood of believers, which constitutes the body of Christ. The church has the function to train its lay people to make a sincere confession of the entire content of the Gospel, so that through their prayer and testimony those on the outside may be brought into relation with Christ and receive the ministrations of Word and Sacrament from the pastor.

Bishop Bo Giertz of Goeteborg presented the theme: "What does it mean today: I believe one holy Christian Church?" The church as an article of faith is in some manner perceivable in the world, but it cannot be demonstrated, controlled, or photographed. Only by faith can it be perceived as God's church. It is shaped by Him. Every attempt to understand the church as founded and shaped by man, and correspondingly to evaluate and analyze it, fails to see its divinely established character, just as every effort must fail, which seeks to understand who Christ is by purely human cogitative capacities and research methods. The church is holy because it is God's church. It is apostolic because it was guided by the apostles as the instruments of the Most High, and because the apostolic message is normative for the church; the apostles are counted as belonging to the foundation of the church. This takes also the New Testament canon into account. The church is catholic in the sense of Cyril of Jerusalem: it embraces the entire world; it always proclaims the whole counsel necessary for salvation; it leads men of all kinds to the true faith in Christ; and finally, it possesses the remedy for all sins and is the bearer of all virtues and spiritual gifts. It is important to confess and to live this article of faith also in our time.

Finally, Regin Prenter of Aarhus discussed the question, "What does it mean today to be the Church?" The constitution of the church cannot be separated from its spiritual character and must therefore be drawn up in conformity with it. It must be provided that the means of grace are in primary relation to the people receiving them, therefore also with the office instituted by Christ for their administration. Dr. Prenter examined the seven marks of the church according to Luther's *Von den Conciliis und Kirchen* and applied them to the situation today, i.e., to the practice of national churches existing in many countries. He held that the question is not exclusively one of the true doctrine in the pulpit, but also of the true confession and life of the congregation. At this point disciplinary ordinances are possible, but not doctrinal sanctions (*lehrgesetzliche Sicherungen*). The responsibility of the bishop does not imply police and compulsion, but rather a positive pastoral counseling and brotherhood. The heretic must be convinced that he does not stand in the consensus of the congregation. Only if he does not then resign, must he finally be compelled to do so. Today's national churches are not ready for this practice. An evangelical training is needed, in which the Holy Spirit brings a renewal through the means of grace. This method frequently imposes a cross upon the minister. The church serves the world by resisting the forces in the world, which attack the church. Through the loss of temporal influence it is brought into a situation where it must take recourse to its own sources of power.

A difficult assignment fell to *Oberkirchenrat* Klapper, who represented the German National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation in an evening meeting at the Sittensen parsonage. After the customary amenities one of the Swedish guests asked the *Oberkirchenrat*, what the LWF would do if the brethren of the Swedish *Sammlung* should be forced out of the state church, as seemed to be indicated. Would the LWF declare itself for the cause of the Lutheran Confessions, or would the *Sammlung* be written off as a sect? Naturally, Dr. Klapper could not answer. It became apparent that the LWF could only decide for the official institution, without regard for truth and confession.

The evangelical groups feel themselves abandoned by church leaders, especially by the bishops, who seem to be of the opinion that they can stand above all parties. Professor Heubach expressed in very earnest terms that the Gospel does not wish to be tolerated in the church beside false doctrines, but that it alone can have validity. The plight of the confessional movement is not, he said, that it meets with opposition, but that the ordained guardians of the confession, viz., the councils and bishops, do not take their position on the side of the truth. The present movement would probably be the last effort of the church, which was revived in the battle with the Third Reich.

When the *Landessuperintendent* (not identified) raised the optimistic objection, that the Gospel could not pass away, Bishop Bo Giertz answered, that Christ could indeed remove the candle-

stick of the unfaithful church, and "we must earnestly ask, whether there will still be a Lutheran Church in the sense of the confessions fifty years from now"—an amazing testimony by a bishop, who stands in the Swedish succession, in whose country the World Council of Churches held its Fourth Assembly this year (Uppsala).

II. Joint Statement at Sittensen

Concern was expressed that statements issued at Sittensen should not be regarded as a confession but rather as a joint testimony. The statement (which follows) was accepted and subscribed to by thirteen groups, including the Lutheran Free Churches, while several others preferred to "concur." The latter were *Kein anderes Evangelium* and the *Evangelisch-kirchliche Arbeitsgemeinschaft fuer biblisches Christentum in Wuerttemberg*. *Lutherische Monatshefte* reports that the Berlin *Sammlung* abstained from taking a position on this statement and discusses a longer statement of similar import issued by the Berlin *Sammlung* in 1967. Berlin might well have other than theological reasons for this abstention.

The statement from Sittensen reads:

The lectures and discussions, despite various differing viewpoints in particulars, led to the conclusion, that a clear word must be spoken on the following three points against the errors in doctrine, which today creep into the congregations.

1. The revelation of God in Holy Scripture may not be called into question or reinterpreted by a so-called modern understanding of the ego or of the world. The saving acts of God in time and space: the true incarnation of the eternal Son of God in the man Jesus of Nazareth, the miracles which He performed by divine power, His sacrificial death on the cross, His physical resurrection, and His exaltation to the right hand of God, also the expectation of His return at the end of time—are the unrelinquishable basis of Christian faith.
2. What the church today needs above all is an association with Holy Scripture, which accepts without reservation, that God judges our lives, frees, guides, and leads us to eternal salvation through this Word, just as it is. Many of the supposed results of the so-called historical criticism of the Holy Scriptures rest upon rational presuppositions, which are questionable in themselves and not in accordance with the understanding of the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God, wrought by the Spirit.
3. According to the New Testament the exalted Christ is the Head of His church. Wherever this Christ, His divine-human character, His atoning death, His physical resurrection, and His ascension to the Father, are denied, there

the Church is not present. Christ rules His Church through the means of grace instituted by Him, the Word and the sacraments, for the administration of which He has established the pastoral office. The office is not subject to the optional disposition of man, but is determined by the institution and command of the Lord. Wherever the Biblical foundation and the apostolic commission of the church are denied, Christian faith degenerates into a program of mere humanitarianism, politics, and mundane philosophy.

The message of the orthodox church is the source of the joy and freedom of man. We implore the Holy Spirit that He may preserve the truth of the Gospel also for us in our time.

On Saturday, Feb. 24, 1968 all the members of the following groups present accepted this word to the congregations:

Kirchliche Sammlung um Bibel und Bekenntnis, Sweden

Pfarrerbund fuer Bibel und Bekenntnis, Norway

Ja und Nein der Kirche, Denmark

Kirchliche Sammlung um Bibel und Bekenntnis, Bavaria

Kirchliche Sammlung um Bibel und Bekenntnis, Braunschweig

Kirchliche Sammlung um Bibel und Bekenntnis, Hanover

Kirchliche Sammlung um Bibel und Bekenntnis, Schleswig-Holstein

Lutherischer Konvent, Hamburg

Maerkisch-Lutherischer Konvent, Westphalia

Dorlarer Kreis, Westphalia

Evangelisch-lutherische (alllutherische) Kirche

Evangelisch-Lutherische Freikirche

Selbstaendige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche

The last three bodies named are the Lutheran Free Churches in fellowship with The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

III. Reactions in the *Landeskirchen*

Lutherische Monatshefte (Hamburg) expresses the views and reactions of the *Landeskirchen* in very wide circles. This periodical reveals that the German churches are aware of many problems facing them. Gotthold Mueller asks, "Have not the pastors for decades kept a double set of books with their scientific theology in the midst of their congregations?" (January, 1968)—Heinz Brunotte asks, "Has the German *Landeskirche* a Future?" (Same issue). But the remedy suggested seems to be one of changing the ancient provincial boundaries of the *Landeskirchen*.—Otto Perels (Feb. 1968) discusses the *Evangelische Berlin Sammlung* shortly before the Sittensen assembly, reprinting their statement of Sept. 29, 1967. Perels finds that this *Sammlung* is improperly creating an opposition front and casting aspersion on the sincerity of those pastors, who are trying to communicate in a new manner, because the old vocables will no longer do, however Biblical they might sound. "The guar-

dians of the holy grail of orthodoxy", he writes, take a position against those, who sincerely try to apply the living Word of God! He asks, "Who would be in doubt, on which side he should take his stand!" Ernst Henze (March 1968) discusses "Revelation, Scripture, Church", the Sittensen theme, in a much more sympathetic manner. He questions the appropriateness of the popular terms "intellectual honesty" and "world come of age" as adequate to describe "modern theology" and its following. Henze calls for dialog between those of Sittensen and the *Landeskirchen*. He closes: "In any case, only the church which believes and confesses, has the promise that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."—(The documentation section of the March issue of *Lutherische Monatshefte* offers also the Duesseldorf Declaration of *Kein anderes Evangelium* and the statements of Bishop Huebner in Neumeister, which are expressive of the evangelical movement).

One must recognize that the leaders of the *Landeskirchen* are also troubled men. They depend upon their governments for their church support,—one-tenth of the income tax. If they cannot hold the church together, the movement to cut off this support to the churches may gain even greater momentum. A further consideration is also the fact that the state-related churches have strong national loyalties and seek to play a role in maintaining or regaining favorable relations in the world for their homeland. Religion and politics can become strangely interrelated, leading to the evangelical protest against "politicizing". Thus it will not do for the German *Landeskirchen* to be separatistic in the ecumenical movement; their striving to accept the policies of the WCC is apparent in many meetings, provincial synods, and LWF meetings. Communion fellowship with the Reformed and United churches has been established in all provinces, Bavaria being the latest. Three bishops of Germany have accepted the ordination in the apostolic succession, a success credited to Stephen Neill, who taught in Hamburg for a decade. The formation of regional churches in the mission fields is promoted by some bishops, as indeed it is by the leaders of LWF. The strong Norwegian mission society has threatened to withdraw from the Commission on World Mission of LWF, as they did from the mission department of WCC, over the policies executed in the mission fields by LWF.

Thus, while the evangelical groups fear that they may be ostracized, the national churches fear that they may soon be exceedingly poor, and that they will need to learn from the American brethren, how to carry on stewardship programs. Such an eventuality might produce the most favorable climate for a healthy Lutheranism. It seems that some solutions must soon be found. German citizens have the privilege of being exempt from the church tax if they declare themselves atheists or members of free churches, which step is in fact taken by less than five percent. If the active membership in "core Congregations" of the *Landeskirchen* is generously estimated at ten percent, there remains a vast majority, who pay their church tax as good citizens, but do not take part in church activities. It

would be a mistake, however, to conclude that this vast majority is totally materialistic and un-Christian. An observation of these people will reveal much confusion, but also much discontent with the established church. To this writer there is no doubt but that the true preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments could produce a revival in Germany. It is devoutly to be wished that American Lutherans, moving toward a sounder Lutheranism, could address themselves to the European Lutherans on a folk to folk basis. Given the proper approach, a reestablished relation between peoples could contribute much to winning European Lutherans to a better understanding of Lutheranism. Germany, in particular, is still suffering from its debacle under Hitler, and while American Lutherans have experienced a forgiving and forgetting, the Germans, whether religiously active or not, have not been able to forget. The feelings of guilt, repentance, and shame run deep. One pastor in Berlin put it into words: "We have been severely punished, oh, how severely! We pray that this may have an end." The continuous production of books, films, and TV productions, which may make us feel like righteous deliverers, acts as a continuous scourging upon an entire generation. The Lutherans of all countries need to extend the hand of fellowship to relieve this anxiety.

The joint assemblies of the German and Scandinavian *Sammlungen* show considerable promise in the understanding of Lutheran problems, but it is too sanguine an estimate to expect that they could offer any substantial hope for the recovery of Lutheranism in Europe without effective assistance. This might well be the form that a mission to Europe should take to prevent the total secularization of Lutheran and Protestant Christianity.