

Concordia Theological Monthly

Volume 5

Article 31

3-1-1934

Ottomar Fuerbringer

W. G. Polack

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Polack, W. G. (1934) "Ottomar Fuerbringer," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 5 , Article 31.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol5/iss1/31>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Jer. 2, 32: Vergisset doch eine Jungfrau ihres Kranzes nicht noch eine Braut ihres Schleiers. — Vergisset doch eine Jungfrau ihres Schmuckes nicht noch eine Braut ihres Schleiers.

Mat. 14, 33: Und fing an zu erzittern und zu ängstigen. — Und fing an zu gittern und zu gagen.

Diese Beispiele ließen sich um das Zehnfache vermehren. Man nehme nur seine Lutherbibel und streiche sich die Alliterationen in den Psalmen an. Es ist wahrlich der Mühe wert, in diesem Jubeljahr auch den Luthertext der Bibel wieder gründlich zu studieren, auch von der sprachlichen Seite aus. Es ist gewiß nicht zu viel behauptet, daß in dieser Beziehung keine moderne Übersetzung die Lutherbibel übertrifft.

P. E. S r e k m a n n.

Ottomar Fuerbringer.

1810—1892.

The sainted Dr. Joseph Schmidt, a former president of our Fort Wayne Concordia and successor of Ottomar Fuerbringer as president of the Michigan District, in his sermon at the latter's burial accorded him this significant tribute: "God, the Lord, calls His servants and places them all on the same footing in this respect, that they are His ministers, servants of the Most High. In other respects, such as gifts, position, and sphere of activity, however, there is a great difference among them. No one will deny that our Fuerbringer was a prominent servant of God, outstanding in his endowments and in his fidelity. Not commonplace, but extraordinary talents had been vouchsafed unto him. . . . A humble servant of the Lord was all he wished to be. . . . As a true theologian he accepted the Word of God as the rule of his theology as well as of his faith and life. 'It is written' was the deciding factor for him, and he knew no compromise and no yielding, and this gave him an unshakable steadfastness."

This fine testimonial from one who was personally acquainted with Ottomar Fuerbringer characterizes him splendidly and may well serve as an introduction for the brief sketch of his life which is here offered.

In his interesting biography of Ottomar Fuerbringer, published in Volumes 49 and 50 of *Der Lutheraner*, the sainted Rev. F. Lochner wrote: "In Fuerbringer passed away the last of the theologians of the Saxon immigration, 1839, which was so important for the reconstruction of the true Lutheran Church in America." Dr. A. L. Graebner called him "the profoundest thinker among the fathers of the Missouri Synod."

The more one studies the early history of our Synod, the more one is impressed with the greatness of the leaders and founders.

Familiarity breeds increasing admiration. These men, whom the Lord had gathered together in strange ways and led to our American soil, were cast in a heroic mold, and Ottomar Fuerbringer was by no means the least of them. There are many things in his life that are exemplary and should inspire the generation of pastors that is to-day carrying on the work of the fathers.

Ottomar Fuerbringer was born at Gera, Reuss, Germany, June 30, 1810, the son of William Fuerbringer and Ohristine Ernestine, *née* Graef. It was an ancient family, which could trace its lineage back to the fourteenth century. His parents were well-to-do and socially prominent, but infected spiritually by the prevalent rationalism. He was a highly gifted boy, and in spite of the early death of his father and the consequent straitened circumstances of his mother it was arranged that he could attend the *Rutheneum*, the famous Gera *Gymnasium*, where he progressed so rapidly that he had to spend two years in *Prima* because he was too young to enter the university.

He was not yet fully eighteen when he matriculated at the University of Leipzig and took up the study of theology. His religious training from childhood had been rationalistic. At Leipzig all but two of his professors, August Hahn and F. W. Lindner, Sr., were out-and-out rationalists, and the teaching of Christian doctrine done by these two was, as Professor Guenther says, *schwaechlich*.

Although he had enrolled for the study of theology and attended lectures in that department, Fuerbringer was particularly interested in history, German literature, and philosophy. He did not take part in the wild life of some of the students, but lived decently and honorably and, being athletically inclined, exercised himself in turning, riding, and swimming.

It was after his first year at Leipzig that he experienced the religious awakening which was to influence his career and shape his future life. A group of students, prompted by the testimony of several believing laymen and by a candidate named Kuehn, formed a club, which met regularly to read old German literature and the Bible. Theo. Brohm, J. F. Buenger, Otto Herman and Carl Ferdinand William Walther, and Franz Delitzsch, the later famous theologian, were some of the other members besides Ottomar Fuerbringer. For a time Professor Lindner conducted a weekly *collegium philo-biblicum* for them, expounding the Scriptures and giving the students practical directions in homiletics. Fuerbringer became interested enough to engage in the study of the Greek New Testament privately. He also made the acquaintance of a pious cobbler named Goetsching, who advised the study of the Lutheran Confessions. As a result he was the first to reach a conviction of the truth of orthodox Lutheranism. Through Goetsching the club-members found a little church where Magister Haensel preached the pure Gospel. Contact

was also made with Pastor Martin Stephan of the Bohemian church in Dresden through one of his followers, named Wetzel. Although this circle of truth-seeking young men was hated by the other students and ridiculed as bigots, pietists, obscurantists, and the like, they continued their devotional studies, and the ties thus formed and strengthened continued for the most part throughout life.

When Fuerbringer's student days came to a close in the spring of 1831, he was fortunate in obtaining through a friend, the merchant Schwabe, the appointment of tutor at a private boys' school in Eichenberg, conducted by Pastor G. H. Loeber. He was to spend the next seven years of his life with this pious, God-fearing, and consecrated man, — a privilege and a blessing for which he was grateful ever afterwards.

After a year at Eichenberg, Ottomar Fuerbringer presented himself at Gera for the examination *pro ministerio*. The examiners were of course rationalists, who found him well prepared, but passed him very unwillingly on account of his strictly orthodox views and gave him no hope for an appointment. He was by no means downcast on this account, but returned to Eichenberg joyfully, continued to teach his pupils, studied theology, and preached occasionally for Loeber, especially on festival days.

It was during his Eichenberg sojourn that he met Martin Stephan personally; he went to him on one occasion for counsel. He was, like the others of the circle, strongly attracted to the man by his earnest Lutheranism, his evangelical preaching, and his pastoral experience. It was also during this time that negotiations were begun by Graf Dethleff von Einsiedel to obtain Ottomar Fuerbringer for the directorate of the new missionary seminary planned by the Missionary Society of Dresden (later the famous Leipzig Mission Society). Martin Stephan, on consultation, suggested a course of procedure that caused the Graf to change his plans. Afterwards the renowned Karl Graul occupied the office intended for Fuerbringer. It is evident that the Lord wanted Fuerbringer for another field.

The story of the Saxon emigration of 1838—39 need not be rehearsed in this connection. It will suffice to state briefly Fuerbringer's part in it. He left Bremerhaven, together with G. H. Loeber, on the *Republic*, in October, 1838. From New Orleans they traveled to St. Louis on the river steamer *Knickerbocker*, arriving on January 30, 1839. Together with C. F. W. Walther, G. H. Loeber, and others, he remained in St. Louis for a time, but in the late spring he also went to Perry County, Missouri, where the majority of the immigrants had settled. In the midst of the distress and turmoil of the colony there he and Brohm and Buenger undertook the task for which these three must ever receive the gratitude of posterity, — the erection of a little log-cabin college and seminary. They obtained the

support of the pastors, G. H. Loeber (Altenburg), E. G. Keyl (Frohna), and C. F. W. Walther (Dresden), for the project. There will always be something heart-stirring in the picture of these men felling trees, sawing logs, and digging a well in order that an institution might be established for the teaching and perpetuation of the faith which they held so dear and for which they had sacrificed and endured so much. Their example, their trust, their vision of the future, puts us to shame in our day. Our opportunities are vast, and yet we are slow and timid in meeting them as joyously and aggressively as we ought.

When the building was dedicated in October and opened in December, 1839, and instruction was begun, Ottomar Fuerbringer taught ancient languages and history. After C. F. W. Walther and J. F. Buenger were called to St. Louis, he and Brohm carried on alone.

However, it was not to be for long. By the following summer he was at work in a congregation of his own. Very likely at the suggestion of Theo. Buenger, later known as "Kantor Buenger," Fuerbringer was called to serve a group of Hanoverians and Hessians who had settled at Elkhorn Prairie (now Venedy), Illinois. Here Fuerbringer experienced a full share of the hardships and privations of pioneer life. The story of his journey to Elkhorn Prairie from St. Louis and his reception there is worth repeating. The distance between these places is about 40 miles. There were no transportation facilities. Otto Herman Walther, pastor of Old Trinity in St. Louis, accompanied Fuerbringer on foot as far as Belleville. They were met at the tavern there by a reception committee of one, in the person of W. Huellskoetter. The three partook of a frugal breakfast of bread, cheese, and beer, and Fuerbringer took leave of Walther, who trudged back to St. Louis alone. Huellskoetter had brought a horse, on which he expected the new pastor to ride, while he himself would walk the twenty-two miles to Elkhorn Prairie at his side. As saddles were rare among the poverty-stricken settlers, Huellskoetter had simply strapped a blanket across the horse's back. Fuerbringer had no desire to ride at first. When he finally took his turn, he found that riding without stirrups made his legs as tired as walking did. The two men changed off, now walking, now riding, and finally arrived at their destination late at night, weary and dusty. Rev. Mangelsdorf, a successor of Fuerbringer's at Venedy, wrote: "This tiresome journey was, so to say, a slight foretaste of the many inconveniences, tribulations, privations, and heavy crosses under which he was to labor here."

Elkhorn Prairie was a typical pioneer community. The people dwelt in cabins built of rude logs. Nails were scarce and too expensive, so that the shingles on the roofs were simply weighted down with logs placed over them, and the flooring, loosely laid, was uneven, warped, and if one inadvertently stepped on one end, the strip

would fly up and hit one in the face. There were fireplaces, but no stoves. The parsonage was no better than the other cabins. On winter mornings the neighbors would look over to the parsonage to see whether smoke was issuing from its chimney or whether the pastor had frozen to death during the night. To Fuerbringer's church at Venedy we may apply the words written of a similar edifice elsewhere:—

Crude the pew and crude the pulpit,
Simple every outward form,
Rough the timber, bare the ceiling;
So it speaks of stress and storm,
Speaks of pilgrim, speaks of stranger,
Speaks of tears and victories won,
Speaks of hardships and of danger
And of duty nobly done.

In the fall of 1842, Fuerbringer brought a wife to his parsonage, the widow of Otto Herman Walther, Agnes Ernestine, *née* Buenger, with her small son, John Walther, and her adopted daughter, who later married Prof. M. Guenther.

There were not only external hardships, but also internal troubles, to try the pastor. His personal courage, his fidelity to orthodox Lutheranism, and his pastoral wisdom are very evident during the strife that arose among his people on account of his insistence that the use of the rationalistic catechism and hymn-book which had been brought over from Germany be discontinued. His enemies threatened him with bodily harm, even employed rowdies to waylay and club him, but to no avail. A split in the congregation came in 1845. Fuerbringer and his loyal adherents were forced to give up the church property (although some restitution was made for the loss) and to build a new church; but the controversy had the effect of strengthening the faith of those who remained true to the Lutheran principles. The congregation flourished and grew by immigration. Fuerbringer preached and taught school regularly. A preaching-station was founded at Grand Prairie, which became a *Filialgemeinde* in 1850. A soundly Lutheran congregational constitution was adopted in 1849. All in all it was a blessed ministry, and Fuerbringer and his family lived happily on the little which his people were able to contribute. In 1849 his salary, including *Schulgeld*, was only \$130.50.

Riches unsearchable he preached
And drew this pittance for his household needs,
And yet he seemed to think it was enough.
I do not know that ever he complained.

There are two things that occurred during the time of Fuerbringer's pastorate at Venedy that deserve mention. One is his participation in the deliberations that led to the establishment of our Synodical Constitution and the founding of Synod. He was present

at the historic conference between the Saxons and the Loehe men in St. Louis, 1846. Lochner, who was also in attendance, says: "I had occasion to see what an important part Ottomar Fuerbringer had in this work and in general in the organization of Synod." He also attended the organization meeting in Chicago, 1847, although his congregation did not join till the following year. It is evident that his opinion and counsel were eagerly sought and appreciated.

The other matter is indicative of the esteem in which he was held for his deep theological learning. When in 1848 arrangements were under way to remove the college and seminary from Altenburg to St. Louis and a new theological professor was to be chosen, many had Fuerbringer in mind, and it was particularly C. F. W. Walther who urged his election. However, Walther himself was elected in October, 1849, and Fuerbringer was destined to remain in the active ministry.

At this time the young Synod was in the midst of its historic controversy with Grabau and the Buffalo Synod. Some of the congregations that had been associated with Grabau turned to Missouri and sought pastors from this body. A congregation in Buffalo extended a call to Ottomar Fuerbringer several times. Upon his repeated declination the congregation finally asked the fourth synodical convention (1850, in St. Louis) to urge him to accept. He begged to be excused, however. A group of Lutherans who had settled at Freistadt and Kirchhayn, near Milwaukee, having had their attention favorably directed to him in this connection, sent him a vocation, which he did accept.

The remainder of Fuerbringer's life was spent in the North. He served the congregation at Freistadt from 1851 to 1858 and then followed a call to St. Lawrence's Church at Frankenmuth, Michigan, where he remained until his death in 1892.

Noteworthy in regard to his pastorate at Freistadt is the fact that he was there thrown into the midst of the Grabau controversy. His series of articles on the subject, which appeared in Volume 9 of *Der Lutheraner* ("*Geschichtlich-theologischer Beitrag zu vollstaendiger Beurteilung der Streitigkeiten zwischen den Grabauianern und den sogenannten Missouriern*"), Lochner says, was so historically exact and truthful and so theologically sound that Grabau in his *Informatorium* did not even attempt a refutation, but referred to them as *Fuerbringers Fuerbringerei*. It might also be mentioned that Fuerbringer contributed the initial article in *Lehre und Wehre*, "*Zur Lehre vom heiligen Predigtamt*," January, 1855, Vol. I, No. 1.

His outstanding gifts of leadership, objective judgment, his theological depth and soundness, his method of clarifying the principles and then applying them to the problems at hand, not only endeared him to his people, but also to his fellow-pastors far and near.

Of his work as shepherd of the flocks at Freistadt and Frankenmuth we are unable to give a finer description than the following, originally paid to another:—

He had his work to do,
And did it faithfully, as unto God;
And where he labored, hungry hearts were blest,
Sinners became good men. The village smiled
Where Fuerbringer abode.
As God blest Obed-Edom and his house
The while the ark was there, so did He bless
The towns and fields and hamlets where this man
Dwelt, with God's glory in his humble soul.

He was at Frankenmuth when the Civil War broke out. Upon receipt of the notice from the Government that the town should make up its quota of men for military service, Fuerbringer called together his people and advocated that the unmarried men volunteer, so that the married men would not be forced to leave their families. His words had the result that then and later the single men furnished the quota voluntarily, and the Government did not have to resort to the draft in Frankenmuth at all.

During the time of his pastorate at Freistadt the first division of Synod into Districts was made, and Fuerbringer received the election to the presidency of the Northern District, which then comprised the States of Wisconsin and Michigan. He served in this capacity for eighteen years, until 1872, when he asked to be relieved. However, when in 1874 a new division of the District took place and Wisconsin and Minnesota became the Northwestern District and Michigan, with Ontario added, remained the Northern District, he was elected President again. Though somewhat reluctantly, he accepted and officiated until 1882.

He continued to serve his congregation in spite of his advancing age and growing physical weakness. In 1884 his son Ludwig, then a student at our Seminary in St. Louis, took over the work for three months while he was taking treatments for his eyes, and in 1885 the son was called to serve as his father's assistant. Father and son labored together until finally death called Ottomar Fuerbringer to the Church Triumphant, on July 12, 1892.

With his passing the last of the fathers and founders of our Synod was laid to rest. He was a staunch Christian, a loyal Lutheran, a true theologian, a consecrated pastor, a devoted husband and father, and a sterling example of posterity.

O God, let not that race of giants die!
Give us more men like them, old-fashioned, brave,
True to the truth, men that have made the Church
Mighty and glad and songful in the past!

W. G. POLACK.