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Evangelical Christianity in America and Its Significance for Evangelical Christianity in Germany

By **FRITZ HAHN**

(Lic. Fritz Hahn, professor of evangelical theology at the teachers' college in Darmstadt-Jugendheim, Hessa, had been sent by the U. S. Military Government in Germany to the United States to study the systems of religious education and the church schools in our country. He spent most of his time from April to July, 1949, under the direction of our Synod's Board for Parish Education, visiting our Seminary and schools in St. Louis and Concordia Teachers College in River Forest. Dr. J. M. Weidenschilling has summarized and translated Professor Hahn's report. Professor Hahn is fully conscious of the fact that a period of three months is insufficient to venture a judgment on American Christianity. Though the report does not contain any findings with which our readers are not acquainted, we submit it nevertheless. Professor Hahn points out where American Lutheranism can make a rich contribution in the reconstruction of the German churches. At the same time the American reader will ask himself whether or not it is possible to strengthen our churches in those areas which Professor Hahn considers so significant. — F. E. M.)

I

1. The first impressions on a German visitor are disturbing and confusing, because he is here confronted by a tremendous multiplicity of churches and sects. The many divisions in Protestantism are due in part to the various historical backgrounds and to the diversity of languages formerly used in their church services. Furthermore, the tendency toward individualism and independence, particularly strong among the pioneers, was an important factor in producing many separate church bodies. That human interests, bigotry, and pharisaism contributed toward the formation of sects is not to be denied. American evangelical Christianity is in no sense of the word homogeneous.

2. This outward diversity seems to reflect the theological divergences, which cover the entire range from stanch orthodoxy to crass rationalism. At the right wing, that of strict orthodoxy, stand The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church. Both groups adhere to the Lutheran Confessions of the sixteenth century, which form the basis of their preaching and church structure. To the left, or liberal, wing belong many Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist churches. However, among these groups there are some pronounced

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Fundamentalists. Within various church bodies there are influential groups that adhere to the Biblical message or are at least giving consideration to the substance of the Gospel. Dr. Joachim Wach, formerly of Leipzig and for a number of years at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and considered an authority in the field of philosophies of religion, told me that liberalism is on the decline. However, in many denominations the preachers in the age groups from 40 to 60 are evidently still guilty of curtailing and falsifying the Biblical message or converting it into a legalistic moralism. I gained the impression that the Missouri Lutherans, the American Lutheran Church, and perhaps also the United Lutheran Church (concerning which I have been informed only indirectly) have a particularly great responsibility as to the future of evangelical Christianity in the U. S. A. I believe, moreover, that the Lutheran churches can meet their responsibility only if they do not isolate themselves theologically, but will show readiness to study problems that have been live issues in Germany during the past fifteen years. Such frankness need in no wise lead to a hasty, false unionism.

3. In spite of the multitude of denominations the German visitor gradually recognizes several principles which seem to be characteristic of practically all American evangelical churches. Chief among these is the strong emphasis on the congregation. The individual congregation is the center of the church life. Differences may appear in the various denominations, but according to my observations the church life is generally marked by a strong and independent congregationalism. Undoubtedly, the separation of Church and State as provided by the Constitution strengthens the principle of congregationalism. The Lutheran Church in America has preserved a good heritage of the Reformation in truer form than has been the case in many European Lutheran churches, for American Lutheranism is predominantly congregational, European Lutheranism episcopal. The congregation is sovereign with respect to all its external and internal administration. The local congregation determines its confessional standard, calls and discharges its pastors and also teachers in case it maintains a church school. According to the model constitution for the congregations of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, "The congregation as a body shall have the supreme power in the external and internal administration of its affairs. Any right or duty which may have been delegated by the congregation to an individual member or a group of members within the congregation shall always be subject to revision by the congregation."

Because of the principle on which the congregation is founded, the members are held responsible for the church life of their congregation. The number of non-theologically trained members, active in church work, is enormous in comparison with their number in Germany. In America laymen serve as superintendents of Sunday schools, as teachers in Bible classes for adults, in the Church's program for adult education, in its high schools, and in visiting the homes. It was my impression that the church members not only participate in church activities to a greater extent than our people do, but that they even direct these to a considerable degree.

That the American church members are conscious of their responsibility toward the Church is evident particularly in their willingness to contribute toward its support. Since the Church receives no support from the State and may not tax its members, its income is dependent entirely on the personal contributions of its members. What impressed me most deeply was that the freewill offerings of the people not only take care of the expenses of the local congregation and pay the salaries of the pastor, one or more teachers, organist, janitor, but also meet the financial needs of church colleges, seminaries, universities, and of numerous charities and missions. Such extensive church activities are possible only because all members are willing to give liberally.

In attempting to describe the church life in America, we must not overlook the importance of the church schools. In the State-supported public schools no religion may be taught. Nor does the State grant any support to the church schools. Among the evangelical churches it is particularly the Lutheran Missouri Synod that has recognized the value of parochial schools. It is satisfied only with such schools as not only provide the children with Biblical instruction, but also make possible their whole training by means of religion as the unifying principle. The congregations bring tremendous sacrifices in order to erect school buildings and to support one or more teachers. The Lutherans feel that these schools are of vital importance for the existence of Christian churches in America. The establishment of Lutheran high schools is still in its early stages.

II

Of what significance for evangelical Christianity in Germany is the evangelical Christianity in the United States? I shall call attention to the following points:

1. *The sovereignty of the individual congregation.* This is beyond a doubt in accord with the New Testament and the Reformation.

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Theoretically German Christianity will agree that the individual congregation should hold this central position, but what is being done about this in practice? An examination of the constitution of the evangelical churches in Westphalia and Hessia-Nassau will show that these bodies are seriously concerned about the realization of the congregational principle. But I do not have the impression that the Evangelical Church in Germany as a whole has gone that way. We should have the courage to become much more independent, more like the ancient Christian Church. During the church-struggle (*Kirchenkampf*, 1933—45) many of our congregations successfully resisted the Nazi regime, because they fought the battles independently of an authoritarian and centralized church government.

2. *The position of the non-theological church member.* We must make much greater efforts to draw our laity into the congregational life. I must say that also in this respect promising beginnings have been made in a number of church groups in Germany. But that will be possible only if we revise the still widely spread pseudo-Lutheran idea of the ministry. The office of preaching has been given to the entire congregation. Today a pastor is burdened with too much work and too many activities. To the extent that we can draw our church members into important church work and put our confidence in them, will their willingness to give liberally of time and talents increase. Instead of raising the necessary funds by assessment, we should train our laity in the art of Christian giving by encouraging them to give locally to their church. Of course, such a practice must be introduced under wise pastoral guidance.

3. *The relationship of Church and State.* We should prepare ourselves for a more complete separation of Church and State. We had better give up once and for all the illusion of a so-called national Church (*Volkskirche*) and carry out the plan of Barmen. Certainly this problem will not be solved at once nor by dispensing with the customary church tax and urging voluntary giving. Rather we must find ways and means for training our congregations to become independent and to give freely.

4. *The Church and society.* We can learn from evangelical Christianity in America concerning the Church's responsibility in regard to society. In the States I never heard anything said about what the Church may expect from society, but rather what the Church owes to society. I am thinking here in particular of the Lutheran school system. We should be more concerned about strengthening and expanding church schools and establishing more of them. Of sig-

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in historical and systematic theology, is far ahead of it in ethics." (*Christian Century*, June 15, 1949, p. 732.) Interest in ethical problems has increased considerably in Germany in the last years. To what extent this will develop from a consistent adherence to Continental theology or as a result of the European postwar situation or because of Anglo-American influence, cannot be determined at present.

ON MEETING DATE LINES

It may be of interest to our readers to become acquainted with the date lines (or is the word deadlines?) which the editors and publishers of this monthly journal must observe every month. We submit the schedule for the March issue.

January 12: The copy of all feature articles, the homiletical section, the "Brief Studies," and the "Book Reviews" must be in the hands of the Managing Editor for necessary editing.

January 17: Copy is sent to the publisher.

January 27: Copy of the "Theological Observer" material is sent to the publisher.

February 1: The galley sheets are sent by the publisher to every member of the Faculty of Concordia Seminary for censorial reading.

February 6: The Editorial Staff carefully examines all the submitted corrections and gives its final approval.

February 7: The Editor makes the selection of the material to appear in the next issue and "makes up the copy."

February 15: The page proof of the issue is submitted to the Editor for his final O.K.

March 1: The March issue reaches the subscriber.