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## Theodore Conrad Graebner, 1876-1950

Paul M. Bretscher

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

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Bretscher: Theodore Conrad Graebner, 1876-1950

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# Concordia Theological Monthly

VOL. XXII

JANUARY 1951

No. 1

## Theodore Conrad Graebner 1876—1950

As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, the editors of the MONTHLY herewith pay tribute to Professor Theodore Graebner, D. D., esteemed teacher, colleague, and friend, whom the Lord of the Church summoned to Himself on Tuesday, November 14. We are sorrowful that through his passing our Church lost within less than twelve months the fourth of its most representative leaders. Yet we also rejoice at the thought that Dr. Graebner has now, after a life of untiring service dedicated to the Head of the Church, entered the rest of the children of God. We praise God for all the mercies He showed His faithful servant.

Dr. Graebner was born November 23, 1876, at Watertown, Wis., where his father, the late Dr. A. L. Graebner, was professor at Northwestern College. After attending the junior colleges in New Ulm, Minn., and Fort Wayne, Ind., he entered Concordia Theological Seminary in St. Louis in 1894 at the age of 17 years. He was graduated from the Seminary in 1897. He served as instructor at Walther College, St. Louis, 1897—1900; at the Lutheran Ladies' Seminary in Red Wing, Minn., 1900—06; as missionary in Chicago and as Editor of the *Illustrated Home Journal* (the English *Abend-schule*), 1906—08; and as pastor of Jehovah Lutheran Church, Chicago, 1908—13. In 1913 he was called to the Seminary in St. Louis. He was to be the editor of *Der Lutheraner* and department editor of *Lehre und Wehre* and *Magazin fuer ev.-luth. Homiletik*. He became editor of *The Lutheran Witness*, together with Dr. Martin Sommer, in the summer of 1914, the issue of July 14 being the first under the new editorial leadership. In July, 1917, he was relieved of the editorship of *Der Lutheraner*, and in 1918 he discontinued as department editor of *Lehre und Wehre* and the



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Lutheran bodies. We should know too that some Lutherans do not share the official doctrine of their church and in some areas congregational life is sadly neglected. In some services with the reform sects are tolerated without proof. All this is true. But it is also true that the true doctrine has gained nothing but victories for two generations and that the drawing together of Lutherans for common efforts should be cultivated even if there is not yet pulpit fellowship and altar fellowship. 32

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② I want to make unmistakable the four fundamental truths. 1) There can be no God plainly made except on the basis of detailed unity. 2) Cooperation is intrinsic and not projected of common interest etc cannot take the place of detailed agreement. 3) Non-coercion affects I have done much - the situation of Little more the modern one point administration, some of education / Dr. Schuler, the in my friends point, and the students to union as well the individual and not to be closed against the administration. and 4) etc

"I have only hearty commendation of such an endeavor as is yours of the Lutheran Men's Society of Houston. I commend every move for the more active participation of our Lutheran laymen in the serious, prayerful consideration of those approaches which promise some hope of a larger Lutheran fellowship. Not in twenty years has the prospect of Lutheran union been darker than today. Yet we shall not cease to labor for a union, on the basis of our Lutheran confession, wholeheartedly subscribed to and made operative in church life, of the Lutheran Church in America.

"I wish to make unmistakably clear four fundamental truths: 1) There can be no God pleasing union except on the basis of doctrinal unity. 2) Co-operation in externals and in projects of common interest cannot take the place of doctrinal agreement. 3) More consistent efforts have been made in the direction of Lutheran union under our present administration, since the election of Dr. Behnken, than in any previous period, and the obstacles to union are inherited and not to be charged against the administration, and 4) We [the reference mark indicates that Dr. Graebner continued in the first line of the typewritten copy.] — It is evident on the original manuscript that the first paragraph was penned for the L. L. L. Seminar, while the second was added later for the intersynodical meeting at Houston."



*Magazin*. Since 1930, at which time *Lehre und Wehre*, the *Magazin*, and *The Theological Monthly* were merged into CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, Dr. Graebner published the following articles:

- "The Indwelling of the Trinity in the Heart of the Believers," Vol. I (1930), pp. 15 ff.; 85 ff.
- "Reformed Tendencies in Certain American Lutheran Churches," Vol. I (1930), pp. 897 ff.
- "The Modern Church Looks at Society," Vol. II (1931), pp. 336 ff.
- "What Is Unionism?" Vol. II (1931), pp. 565 ff.
- "The Ghost of Pietism," Vol. III (1932), pp. 241 ff.
- "Is the New Science Hostile to Religion?" Vol. III (1932), pp. 917 ff.
- "The Modernistic Christ," Vol. IV (1933), pp. 81 ff.
- "Separation of Church and State," Vol. IV (1933), pp. 249 ff.
- "Buchmanism," Vol. IV (1933), pp. 329 ff.
- "Demonic Possession," Vol. IV (1933), pp. 589 ff.
- "Proselytizing, a New Problem," Vol. IV (1933), pp. 755 ff.
- "Predestination and Human Responsibility," Vol. V (1934), pp. 164 ff.
- "New Revisions of Comparative Religion," Vol. VII (1936), pp. 653 ff.
- "Professional Growth in Comparative Symbolics," Vol. IX (1938), pp. 401 ff.
- "The Means of Grace in Roman Theology," Vol. X (1939), pp. 241 ff.
- "General Synod Liberalism in the U. L. C. A.," Vol. XI (1940), pp. 881 ff.
- "New Validations of Theism," Vol. XII (1941), pp. 188 ff.
- "Freedom and the Modern Physical World Picture," Vol. XII (1941), pp. 827 ff.
- "Nathan Soederblom," Vol. XV (1944), pp. 314 ff.
- "Religion and the Modern World Picture," Vol. XVIII (1947), pp. 908 ff.

Yet Dr. Graebner's most important task from 1914 to 1949 was that of editing, promoting, and improving *The Lutheran Witness*. In the issue of March 8, 1949, in which he announced his retirement from the *Witness*, he wrote:

Our first appointment came in 1914, when *The Lutheran Witness* was delivered at our doorstep with some 6,500 paid subscribers.



We [Dr. Sommer and I] have never quarreled or had even a difference of opinion on any editorial question. If a contribution or also one of our editorials did not please both, it did not go in, and that was the end of it. This same right was accorded to each of the editors when the Staff was enlarged. All contributions and editorials had the approval of the entire Staff and of the faculty censors. . . . There has probably never been a long editorship so blessed with harmony and the joy of fellowship.

When on October 1, 1949, the retirement of both Dr. Graebner and Dr. Sommer as editors of the *Witness* became effective, the Staff commented, "They [Drs. Graebner and Sommer] have seen the *Witness* grow from a relatively small church paper to be the second largest Protestant church paper in America, second only to the *Christian Advocate* (Methodist)."

Besides editing the *Witness* together with Dr. Sommer and his Staff and carrying a teaching load which grew in the course of years, Dr. Graebner found time to produce an almost endless amount of literature in the form of tracts, brochures, conference essays, and books. In addition, he edited, since 1921, the *Bible-Student Quarterly*, contributed articles to the *Concordia Cyclopedia* (serving as one of the editors for three years), the *Concordia Historical Quarterly*, the *American Lutheran*, the *Walther League Messenger*, and the *Cresset*, and to symposia, such as *Four Hundred Years* and *Ebenezer*, and to secular journals. Throughout these many years he also wrote hundreds of reviews of books and articles. He also served as a member of important synodical committees, such as the Lutheran Unity Committee, the Board for Young People's Work, the St. Louis Seminary Building Committee, and the Commission on Fraternal Organizations. Nevertheless, he found time to read and study and expand and deepen his knowledge.

What were the peculiar gifts with which the Lord had blessed this child of God? The Lord had given him a clear and penetrating mind, which often electrified those who heard him present his views. He wrote with incomparable clarity and directness. If "good" writing is, in the end, "effective" writing, he was, by all standards, a "good" writer. He compelled the reader to go on and on until he had read the last word. Though Dr. Graebner sometimes took comfort in Melanchthon's dictum in the *Apology*



(*Triglot*, p. 227): "Nothing can be spoken with such care that it can escape detraction," he did not make this dictum a soft cushion on which to recline when the reader happened to express disagreement. He rather stuck tenaciously to the rule: "Write so that you cannot be misunderstood."

An overview of his many books, articles, essays, and editorials indicates that Dr. Graebner was deeply concerned about providing helpful materials which the membership of our Church could understand and use. He was an archenemy of dissertations which, however profound they might be, failed to contribute to the current scene in Church and State. Merely to dig about in the ruins of the past seemed to him purposeless unless one related his findings to the present. In other words, Dr. Graebner wrote, in the best sense of the term, *ad hoc*. Let someone else, more learned than he, write a voluminous tome on the history of Luther's Catechism or the Augsburg Confession, he would write the "story" of Luther's Catechism and the "story" of the Augsburg Confession. Because he was most alert to the present and endeavored to draw inferences from the present to determine the future, he more than once ordered his publishers to remove from the shelves such of his publications as, in his opinion, no longer applied to the present. This factor explains in part his commitment to Emerson's oft-quoted saying: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." When the scene had changed and shifted or he felt compelled to change his mind as a result of more accurate and extensive information he had gathered on a given subject, he got out a new and revised edition or cashiered what he had previously said or written.

In keeping with the above objective, Dr. Graebner had an eye for anything in the world of experience which might be of value to the Church or about which the Church ought to know. He carried a shears in his pocket and clipped freely from newspapers and magazines, and made entries in his pocket notebook and commonplace books. His files were a vast storehouse of information on the most varied subjects, and he remembered what was in these files. He also carried on a voluminous correspondence with people from many walks of life to enrich his own knowledge and appreciation of current events. And he had the rare ability to select from



innumerable viewpoints those which, in his thinking, needed to be pointed up for the well-being of the Church.

In addition, Dr. Graebner, perhaps because of his interest in detail, developed an almost bitter antagonism to abstractions and generalizations. He could not grow hot and hortatory on general sins, but he could pour out acid criticisms on particular sins, especially on those which he believed to be deliberate attacks on God's Holy Word. As the years went by, he became more and more fearful of the use of such ecclesiastical terms as, in his opinion, had degenerated into weasel words, meaning one thing to one and something else to another. With a rare appreciation of the persuasive force of concrete imagery, he consciously endeavored to be concrete in his choice of words and to describe accurately a given situation rather than indulge in vague and meaningless generalizations. "The older I become," he said only a few days before he was rushed to County Hospital, "the more I have come to believe that one may no longer speak of 'lodges.' One must rather refer specifically to this or that 'lodge' and evaluate each on its own merits."

Dr. Graebner was not a scholar in the sense that he had, in the course of his long life, earned scores of graduate credit hours in one or more areas of human interest. He had the ambition in his early youth to devote his life to a study of Sanscrit. But God had willed the course of his life to be otherwise, and he submitted to what he believed to be the Lord's plan for his life. And thus he learned as the need for new knowledge arose and then explored and tried to conquer that new *terra incognita* with the enthusiasm of a college student preparing his first term paper. And yet, despite the fact that his learning was sometimes seriously limited — and no one knew it as well as he — he amassed in the years of his life an over-all familiarity with church history, world literature, the fine arts, the sciences, philosophy, and religion which astounded his hearers and readers. He was a charter member of the Missouri Academy of Science and was elected to membership in the Philosophical Society of Great Britain. Yet, beyond all secular knowledge he truly loved sacred knowledge. He remained throughout his life a consecrated student of the Holy Scriptures, of Luther's theology, of the Lutheran Confessions, and of the great systematizers of



Lutheran doctrine of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Exegesis and dogmatics — these were the sciences which captivated him to the close of his life.

Did Dr. Graebner write poetry? Very little, if any. He appears to have taken to heart the familiar observation of O. W. Holmes, "When you write in prose, you say what you *mean*. When you write in verse, you say what you *must*." And yet, can there be more genuine poetry than the tribute he paid to his student, colleague, associate on the *Witness* Staff, and friend, Dr. W. G. Polack, than the *In Memoriam* published in the *Witness* of June 27, 1950?

One of Dr. Graebner's early literary contributions was a translation into English of Dr. Pieper's *Zur Einigung*. This is symbolic of his two most basic concerns. One of these was to do his share to help our Church solve the language problem after World War I and to make our Synod an indigenous Lutheran Church also with respect to language. Those of us who remember World War I, with its attending difficulties for some of our congregations, may remember, too, his incisive editorials that our congregations convert as quickly as feasible into English without, of course, jeopardizing the cause of the Church. And it was a thrill for him to know that our Church fell in line with his program as the rapidly increasing circulation of the *Witness* indicated. But Dr. Graebner was also interested all his life in the achievement of true Lutheran unity. He was a foe of every movement toward Lutheran union which compromised the truth of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. He was equally a foe of every endeavor to sabotage progress toward true Lutheran unity when, in his opinion, such endeavors narrowed the limitations laid down in the Lutheran Confessions. In a sober mood he observed, after noting what had happened to 20,000,000 Lutherans in central Europe in the past fifteen years, that the diabolical designs of the archenemy of truth could, unless held in check by God Himself, blast also American Lutheranism into all directions of the compass, and that Lutherans in our country must pray fervently that God might frustrate the wicked designs of the Evil One.

Dr. Graebner believed with Luther that good government belongs to the support and wants of man's body. Therefore he took a healthy interest in community and national affairs. He wrote

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extensively on Church-State relationships. He served as president of the Civic Union of St. Louis, and he was the Protestant member of the National Committee for Civic Recovery. In 1937 he traveled to Washington at his own expense and there presented his views on the Supreme Court issue before the Senate hearing committee.

"For former favor ceases, and mortals are forgetful" (*Triglot*, p. 451). Dr. Graebner believed in the truth of this line from Pindar, quoted by Melancthon in the Apology. But he sought his reward not in the present earthly tabernacle. He had his eyes clearly fixed on his home beyond the heavens, into which Jesus, the High Priest, Cause, Captain, and Forerunner of his salvation had entered. And so he lived the life of the writer to the Hebrews: "We have here no abiding city, but seek one to come." That abiding city he has now entered, that final Sabbath, where with the company of just men made perfect he is resting from his labors. His works do follow him.

PAUL M. BRETSCHER