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A Tribute to an Evangelical Ministry

ARTHUR C. REPP

One can hardly speak of a Fuerbringer without bringing in some church history. This is especially true of Alfred O. Fuerbringer, who traces a line of ministers as forebears back to the 17th century through his father's side, and two centuries farther back on his grandmother's side, including one of the signers of the Formula of Concord in 1577—1580 (Martinus Bungerus). He has an even more intimate relationship with the Missouri Synod, for his grandfather was one of the Saxon founders. Two of his predecessors to the presidency of Concordia Seminary were related to him, C. F. W. Walther, who married his great-aunt, and Ludwig Fuerbringer. Furthermore, Alfred was brought up in the seminary community, since his father Ludwig was on the faculty while Franz Pieper was president. His youth was spent largely in these surroundings, among people associated with the early heritage and development of the Missouri Synod.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Alfred O. Fuerbringer has been intensely aware of the history and tradition of both the seminary and the Synod. He has respected the past and has dipped deeply into it for stimulation. Fuerbringer has derived power and courage from its witness to the grace of God and has permitted the perspective of history to give his judgments a proper dimension. This is not to say that he has been shackled by the past. Unlike

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others who are prone to draw about themselves the cloak of history and assume a characteristic Daughters-of-the-American-Revolution pose, he has been willing to strike out for new frontiers when he found it necessary, even new frontiers of theology. He has been keenly aware that every age has a dual responsibility, one to its past and the other, even to a greater degree, to its future.

Characteristic of this attitude were Fuerbringer's words to the counselors' conference in Valparaiso, Indiana, in September 1960. While paying his respects to the valid traditions of the Synod and to its past theology, he was not hesitant to point out that even though the Missouri Synod has "an unbroken series of theological journals which have supplied us with hundreds upon hundreds of fine articles and reviews" and in addition has had some outstanding dogmaticians and practical theologians who have written valuable books for the Lutheran Church, nevertheless, theology in this moment of history is the Synod's newest and most challenging frontier.

In evaluating the past, Fuerbringer pointed out that the Synod's "published theology did not cover nearly as broad a base as we often think." To substantiate this he pointed out that up to that time the Synod had not published one solid book on hermeneutics or an introduction to either the Old or the New Testament. In fact, little had been produced in professional exegetical and historical theology. But it was largely in these areas, Fuer-

bringer emphasized, that the theological questions of our days were being raised. If, as it has been said, we are living in an age which is more revolutionary than that of the Renaissance and that of the Industrial Revolution, then

it isn't possible that so many and such varied and deep upheavals can take place around men and have profound effects on him physically, intellectually, and emotionally without spiritual repercussions. Theology must always concern itself with contemporary man and must endeavor to understand him and communicate to him the revelation of God in language, terminology, and concepts that are intelligible and meaningful to him. Theologians who are loyal and faithful to the Word of God and who see their responsibility to their church and their age must give close study to the impact that the many changes of the present era have on the thinking and acting of man and must pay their respects to all serious effort made in our day to engage in relevant theological activity.

Fuerbringer followed this with an earnest plea to the counselors, the presidents, the theological faculties, and to all the clergy that the human resources of the Missouri Synod be "employed to do the work that the church manifestly needs at this time." In his plea he then outlined specific steps which he thought would aid in following through on the church's newest frontier, theology.

It is this same energetic and aggressive attitude that has marked Fuerbringer's 16 years as president of Concordia Seminary. He came to St. Louis in 1953, succeeding Dr. Louis J. Sieck who, after a brief term of only nine years, had just begun to shake the seminary out of the doldrums into which it had slipped during the period of

the Depression. Sieck was able to transfuse some warm blood and life into the school during his short tenure. This was no mean achievement, for the average age of the faculty was almost 60 years, with an average tenure just short of 17 years when he took office in 1943, as over against 47 years and an average tenure of about 11 years in 1926, the year the seminary was relocated to its present site. Only six new names out of 18 had been added to the faculty roster since 1930. In short succession 21 new men were called to the faculty under Sieck's administration. But just when there were signs of revival and renewed energy, death suddenly overtook him. It therefore became Fuerbringer's task to take hold and with new verve bring the seminary to a point even beyond the visions and dreams of his predecessor.

Fuerbringer came to St. Louis with a broad experience of teaching and administration. Already as a student at Concordia Seminary he volunteered for a vicarage and was assigned to teach a year in the high school department of Concordia College in Portland, Oregon. After graduation in 1925, he took another "year out" in Hayward, California, during which time he also taught at Concordia College in Oakland. After these field experiences he returned to the seminary for a year of graduate work, getting his master's degree in theology in 1927. Thereupon he accepted a call to the university town of Norman, Oklahoma, where he served Trinity Church for five years. Here Fuerbringer showed his broader concern for the church by using his influence to guide the local organizations in areas beyond an interest in bazaars and church suppers. He planned study programs on the work of the church

and stressed the principle that the entire work of the church was a mission program. This was some years prior to the organization of the Lutheran Women's Missionary League. During his years at Norman he took advantage of the university by enrolling in courses as opportunity presented itself.

On June 1, 1934, Fuerbringer was married to Carolyn Kuhlman of Norman. In Carolyn he found a truly devoted Christian helpmeet, one who has been a source of strength and confidence to him, often complementing the very gifts he needed for his ministry. Those close to him during his school days and early years of ministry will recall how marriage transformed him from a shy person to one who now has great ease and a commendable presence in public. This union has been blessed with four children: Kenneth, Max, Marian, and Jane.

In 1934 Fuerbringer accepted a call to Trinity Church in Okmulgee, where he served for three years before going to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to assume larger responsibilities at St. Paul's Church, a downtown parish.

From this position the Synod called him to his first major administrative assignment as the president of Concordia Teachers College, Seward, Nebraska. Here too he showed interests beyond theology and administration. His former colleagues remember him especially for his interest in such widely different fields as music, drama, and science. Writes one instructor:

We in the sciences owed him special thanks for the consideration he gave us in the matter of developing a budget. He made it possible for us to develop a sequence in biology so that Concordia be-

came the first of our colleges to offer a major or minor in science. He placed this emphasis on science despite the fact, as he told me, he had not one hour of any science on his transcript when he received his S. T. M. from the sem.

Under his farsighted leadership the standards of the college were raised so that it became the first of the synodical schools to achieve full accreditation with the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. The experiences at Seward helped make him a "strong champion for the liberal arts as a basic program for all the ministries of the church."

As president at Seward, Fuerbringer developed his skill as an administrator, supplementing his experiences by his association with other school administrators in the state and through courses at the University of Nebraska. In addition, he continued to maintain an interest in theology, keeping in close contact with the new issues facing the Synod. He was appointed to the Synod's Doctrinal Unity Committee in 1950, which association he maintained until it was dissolved in 1962, whereupon it became the Commission on Theology and Church Relations. Fuerbringer was a member of that commission from the beginning.

Already in 1948 he was sent to Europe as a synodical representative in connection with one of the Bad Boll conferences. In recognition of his services to the church at large, his alma mater awarded him the degree of doctor of divinity in June 1953, just prior to his coming to St. Louis.

The casual observer may evaluate Fuerbringer's term as president of Concordia Seminary merely by some of the external signs: the completion of Loeber Hall

(1954), the erection of six faculty homes (1955), two dormitories, Mezger and Fritz Halls (1961), a new library (1962) named Fuerbringer Hall by the board of control in memory of his father, the renovation of nine dormitories and of Pritzlaff and Wyneken Halls (1960—1967), the purchase of considerable perimeter property for additional faculty and student housing, and the completion of the Luther Tower (1965). But Fuerbringer's success is not to be measured by his ability to satisfy an "edifice complex," often the only mark of success of less able administrators. His success is marked chiefly by his evangelical ministry and by the internal changes he inaugurated, changes which permitted Concordia Seminary to enter broader fields of influence and service at higher theological and academic levels.

When Fuerbringer assumed his duties in 1953, most of the administrative responsibilities were directly in the hands of the president and the dean of students. The office of the academic dean had been created shortly before Sieck's death, but the lines of the position had not been clearly drawn. Now all this was changed with the approval of the responsible boards. Fuerbringer clearly defined all administrative offices and attached to them authority commensurate with the responsibilities of the position. The business manager was drawn into the administrative council rather than being a separate and independent officer of the board, as had been the case when Sieck assumed office. The position of dean of students and registrar was eventually separated into two staff offices. The dean of students was given additional assistance in the person of an assistant dean and, somewhat later,

a director of placement. The correspondence school and the school for graduate studies were reorganized and given greater support. The library was put on its feet with a more substantial budget and with additional trained personnel. The collection was greatly expanded so that the library became a center of research and study for students and faculty rather than merely an archival depository for the few who had exotic interests.

Fuerbringer soon recognized that the needs of an aggressive seminary which would assume a leading position in theological education could not expect its sole support to come from the synodical budget. A stronger financial base was called for. He knew, too, that if the seminary was to maintain a sphere of leadership in theological thought, it would need to keep the church informed and keep its channels of communication open. A growing unrest within the Synod had already made the seminary a target of attack during Sieck's presidency. Fuerbringer saw that matters would grow worse before they would become better, since many in the Synod would not understand the seminary's new leadership role if additional lines of communication were not established. For these reasons he recommended the appointment of a director of seminary relations and later a development officer. With Fuerbringer's encouragement the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY became a more vital vehicle for exploring the frontiers of theology. Judging from the sharp increase in subscriptions, this journal is meeting an important need in the church.

Every phase of the seminary's life has felt the strong, positive influence of Fuerbringer. With his encouragement new

avenues of service to students, faculty, and church were explored. Many of the student enterprises had in the past suffered because of frequent changes in student management. To give stability to these enterprises and to permit long-range planning, full-time personnel were appointed without subsequent loss of student interest and initiative. Appreciative of the contributions that students could make to the seminary, he did not hesitate to give them a voice in seminary affairs.

But the vitality of a school is largely dependent on the caliber of its faculty. Here too significant changes were effected. The number of staff members was sharply increased to make it possible for classroom teaching to be at its best. The days of 90 students in a senior elective were definitely over. If theology was to be alive and challenging, the seminary needed theologians who were both confessional and academically well prepared. It was Fuerbringer's dream that Concordia Seminary's faculty would rank among the best. Exegesis was given its rightful place in the curriculum. Confessional theology again became the hallmark of the seminary's theology. Church history was not studied as a justification of past mistakes but as a sincere attempt to understand God's guidance in the ongoing history of the church and its continuous interaction with the social order, for good or for ill, and to interpret the church's past for today's society. The study of practical theology also underwent major changes during President Fuerbringer's tenure. The responsibilities of the director of field education were enlarged. Supervised field experiences became a part of the curriculum not only for preaching but also for worship, teach-

ing, and counseling. A quarter of clinical pastoral education became part of the curriculum. Cooperation with other seminaries in the St. Louis area broadened the horizon of students and faculty alike and made possible a richer curriculum. As a result of the general upgrading of the seminary, it was a simple matter to become accredited with the American Association of Theological Schools once the new Concordia Senior College at Fort Wayne became accredited with North Central.

But Fuerbringer's presidency has not been a one-man show. His genius lay in the fact that he was an administrator in the best sense of the word. He had the evident capacity to transfer authority and responsibility to others in a way that left him with a minimal degree of direct involvement and a consequent freedom to maintain an objective rather than a subjective relationship to conditions and movements in which he had important leadership responsibilities. Fuerbringer was able to draw from others their best and to retain their deep sense of personal loyalty. He had the further ability to recognize a good idea of his adviser, enlarge upon it, and open new dimensions which the adviser may not have seen and then return the suggestion to him for implementation.

One of his most fruitful approaches to a proposal was to say, "Give it to me in writing." This forced the staff member to clarify his own thoughts in the matter and to present the suggestion at its best. This assured Fuerbringer that the idea would not be lost while at the same time the memo served as a reminder which he was committed to follow through. "He took a man at his face value and never

looked for ulterior motives," said one of his advisers. "He was extremely patient, always waiting to hear a man out and listen to all sides of the question before coming to any decision. He never acted in haste but conferred constantly with many of his colleagues to find out their desires and thoughts in crucial matters."

That Fuerbringer's methods were effective may be seen in the appreciative words of another colleague:

As chief administrator he demonstrated his ability to assume great responsibility. Following the characteristic of a Christian gentleman, he never misused his influence and prerogative as the chief officer. He showed by example how a Christian administrator can and should administer his office. He expected his chief administrators to carry on in their area of responsibility. He provided each one with the necessary authority to carry out his office. In return he received the cooperation of his staff. He made every effort to become personally acquainted with each worker and to show his concern and appreciation for the contributions each made in the overall operation.

Because Fuerbringer relied heavily on his staff, he did everything to develop it so that he, in turn, had a more experienced reserve from which he could draw assistance. He never kept them in the wings so that the spotlight would be played only on him. Instead, for example, he had them accompany him to board and committee meetings to be available with resources needed for the occasion.

It soon became evident to everyone associated with Fuerbringer that his source of strength was the gospel of his Lord Jesus Christ. This gave him an evangelical approach that has marked his ministry. This

provided a real source of strength to those who worked close to him. Already as a youth he could admonish and encourage his sisters by telling them, "Anyone who has persistent doubts does not know the power of prayer." In later years he reassured an administrator who was upset and discouraged by attacks on the seminary, "God is in heaven and running His church; we simply must use the talents He has given us to the best of our ability and ask Him in prayer for common sense and guidance; more than that we cannot do." As one would expect from this attitude, the spiritual growth of the entire "seminary family" — faculty, students, and staff — was one of his major concerns throughout his presidency.

His evangelical approach to ministry was often interpreted as a weakness by those who would have preferred a more legalistic approach. This was true especially when he was publicly attacked or questioned with undue sharpness. Then it seemed to some that he gave in too easily. In a calm and positive manner he countered with arguments so that he won over many of his critics, softened the counter-blow, and made his point.

This evaluation of Fuerbringer is reflected in a characterization which one of his former co-workers provided:

Anyone who knows him certainly would agree that there is no evidence of personal animosity or sour disposition which might well have been spawned by the variety of dissent which had characterized the context in which he had discharged the important responsibilities assigned to him by the church. This absence of rancor or evidence of frustration is probably the most gratifying and praiseworthy personal and administrative characteristic I have ob-

served and reflects, it seems to me, a remarkable ability to maintain strict control over personal emotions in a protracted period of stress. Without that priceless capacity in Fibby, much harm could have been done to the work of the church, particularly during the last decade.

In summing up his career to the Board of Control, Fuerbringer said, "I have had lots of grief, but the balance is definitely on the other side, to say nothing of the joy of my forgiveness in Christ."

While the seminary remained Fuerbringer's main interest, he always saw it within the framework of the total church. He exerted a strong influence in theological issues facing the church at home and abroad. On four occasions after 1948 he was sent to Europe as a synodical representative. His interest in the improvement of theological education and world missions prompted officials to send him to Asia in 1957—1958 to study seminaries there. Upon his recommendation and encouragement Concordia Seminary at Nagercoil, India, became affiliated with Serampore, India's only accredited theological school. Through his efforts the world mission board of the Synod held a conference of theological education of all the Synod's seminaries in the Far East at Baguio, Philippines, in October 1964. Similar visits in the interest of theological edu-

cation were made in 1960—61 when Fuerbringer was invited to visit the synodical seminaries in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina.

His contributions to the broader aspects of theology and education were recognized by Valparaiso University when it awarded him a doctorate in humane letters in 1959.

Fuerbringer's broader interests can be seen in the part he played in the organization of the Foundation for Reformation Research in 1957 and the leadership he gave it, first as president (1957—64) and then as executive director (1965—66). He has been on its board of directors since the beginning.

His administrative capacity was recognized also by the National Lutheran Education Conference, which elected him vice-president in 1963 and president in 1964. In the same year he was made a member of the Theologians Advisory Committee of the American Management Association. His community interests are reflected in the fact that he has been a trustee of the State Historical Society of Missouri since 1953 and a trustee of the Clayton Public Library since 1960.

As an offering of thanks to God and in recognition of his outstanding ministry as administrator, educator, theologian, church leader, and Christian gentleman this volume of essays is dedicated to

ALFRED OTTOMAR FUERBRINGER