Concordia Theological Monthly

Volume 41 Article 62

11-1-1970

Theological Observer

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THEOLOGICAL OBSERVER

THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION ASSEMBLY AT EVIAN

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Soon learned books will appear that will tell all there is to tell about the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) assembled at Evian in the summer of 1970. Official printed reports will become available so that everyone who is willing to look will be able to find what he is looking for and overlook what he particularly does not care to see. There will be more than enough ammunition for those who are determined that the LWF must be shot down, and there will still be more than enough left over for use by those who support it as one of the few ways left for the church to make its full impact on the world. This writer will not attempt an evaluation in an effort to keep the Missouri Synod out or to get it in, throw rocks to smash some of the stained-glass windows of the LWF because we do not understand their design, nor enhance these windows by reading something into the colors that is not there. This does not mean that I do not have strong feelings on the whole matter. It means only that I shall attempt to exercise the courtesy that we expect when we invite outsiders to come to our conventions and watch us in action. I was invited to be an official observer and as such I attempted to observe. Since I could not go as a member, in a sense I sat on the outside looking in, although observers were most graciously welcomed and invited to participate. But it's bound to be something like those stained-glass windows. One has to be inside to appreciate them fully. From the outside he sees only the leaded patterns and dull glass that conveys no meaning and evokes no emotion.

I have no qualification to be a critic. I have listened to too much uninformed criticism directed against my own church body. We know what it means to love the Missouri Synod. We have worked in it and for it for many years, and we know its problems. Observers criticize us for these problems, and, in a theoretical sense, well they might. But they cannot understand them because they only observe them and do not bleed from them and do nothing to bind up our wounds and take away our hurts. In short, they cannot react in love because they are on the outside looking in. A wise man of our Synod once told me that it takes at least five years of dedicated effort to earn the right to criticize. And that applies to our Synod and the LWF.

What can rightfully be expected from an official observer? Surely he cannot condense all the official documents that will appear in print and be available to all. Observers, official or not, are neither reporters, who were present in large numbers, nor delegates, who are responsible for the actions and resolutions of the assembly, nor advisers, who lay their learning and their reputations on the line in their proper efforts to produce a given result. Observers only observe, and they observe best when they are most fully detached. But to be detached in order to be a good observer also means that one is not part of the family and therefore has none of that fiery love that heats arguments and brings fists to pound tables and makes people trust each other enough to speak from the heart. If we do not understand what that means, we've probably never had an argument with our wife or been hurt by the action of our children or helped hammer out a resolution that will affect the Synod's future.

An observer is bound to observe many things at an assembly like the one at Evian if he has his eyes open and if his mind is not as shut as his heart is compelled to be. And our minds are shut, even locked tight, when we have shot all the bolts with our own answers positively and unchangeably held, when the hinges themselves are rusted over from disuse, and when the interior is all dank and musty for want of a breath of fresh air. For fresh air is the possibility of all things being seen anew, if not actually made new, in the Christ who is willing to come in and sup with us and have us sup with Him if we will but do something about His knocking also at the doors of our minds. Here is one of the great difficulties that God must constantly overcome in us in order to keep us fresh and vital and alive as the new creatures that we are in Christ. St. Paul reminds us that we no longer see anyone from a human point of view (2 Cor. 5:16) just as surely as we no longer see Christ from a human point of view. This is due entirely to the fact that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. But it would appear that the most difficult task that God has set for Himself is to bring us to be His ambassadors so that He can plead through us: "Be ye reconciled to God!" We are always tempted to slip back into our human framework and attempt to reconcile others to our point of view and even to our way of saying and doing things. The one great task that our reconciled God has given to His reconciled is to get His word of reconciliation out among the unreconciled, those who have no other than the human point of view. This task from God is what the LWF assembly at Evian dedicated itself to and most earnestly sought to carry out under its theme: "Sent into the World."

From the keynote address through all the resolutions to the last action the assembly was made to hear our Lord in His high-priestly prayer: "As Thou didst send Me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." That thought was basic to all the discussion held on changing the site of the assembly from Brazil to France. Questions arose and criticisms were made, not because one site offered more than another but because being sent by Christ was taken seriously and the world into which He sends was taken equally seriously. Does the church have a right to back off from the world when it does not meet certain standards as to what the world must be before the church goes there? Isn't the church overly concerned with itself and the possible reception it might get and the effect it might have when a given manifestation of the world poses a special threat or seems to make the church's being and going suspect? Can circumstances and conditions in the world ever determine the church's sentness by its Lord? In the light of the assembly's theme, wasn't it a mistake not to go to Brazil? Those are dangerous and loaded questions, highly critical and soul-searchingly honest questions, aimed not at the well-being and comfort of the church but at its possible disobedience to its Lord through a greater concern for its own name than His!

The fact is that these questions were openly entertained and honestly discussed without any attempt to arrive at rose-smelling conclusions that would obviate any need of repentance, or perfume into acceptability an action that might smell to high heaven and cause those with a weak stomach to turn away in disgust. For good or for ill, the LWF acted because it was compelled to act. It felt that its decisions dare not be shaped by the world, and therefore it did not go to Porto Alegre. A highly suspect government appeared to insist on shaping at least part of the conditions on which it could come. It also felt that some of the member churches were so indignant at what the Brazilian government was doing and were in such

open protest against its reported inhumanities that not going appeared to give the stronger witness to Him whom the church owns as Lord alone. If this observer observed rightly, he saw the church as not attempting to justify itself before God or the world but living out of the forgiveness which gives the church the daring to act and the courage to be the church under the ambiguities of that world into which its Lord has sent it.

To observe flatly that there was a great deal of discussion on the nature of the Gospel with which the Lord sends His church, might give the impression that these Lutheran leaders do not know as much as our children when we confirm them. That's one of those oversimplifications that becomes a false judgment when we do not observe as carefully as we might or when we observe with minds that are locked in with what we regard as our convictions but which might well be nothing more than our preconceptions and even misconceptions. The whole point was not what the Gospel is in itself, but how it comes to the world as Gospel. When are the addressees capable of hearing it as God's own news, which is always good? Is it just a word that tells something, or is it God's Word through a person who is genuinely and fully there on God's behalf so that God can make His appeal through him? While we do not give the Gospel its power and make it hearable, might it not be possible that we rob it of its power and prevent a hearing by not coming to the world as the Father sent Christ to the world? Is it possible that we only speak of God's love with never any evidence of God's love from us or through us, that we only grope for a mind through an ear without any regard for the man who is a whole man within a given situation and with a wide variety of needs? Can we act out the Gospel without the interpreting Word? Can we tell the Good News without the act by which we show at least something of the good that God intends?

This, of course, involved the church's concern with what we have come to call social action. In one of the sections to which I was assigned and which finally framed what it considered should be the LWF's stance in this area, we agreed that the Gospel is God's word of forgiveness in Jesus Christ which needs nothing from us to make it God's good news. But we can do a great deal to prevent it from coming as the good news that it is. By a withdrawal from people where and as they are, we can give the impression of unconcern and aloofness that in no way represents the Spirit of Christ. Feeding the hungry is not the Gospel, but it is not possible to preach the Gospel eating cake while those whom one addresses are dying for want of a crust of bread. It seemed to me that the Missouri Synod has already framed a kind of solution in the Mission Affirmations which it adopted in Detroit. The LWF would have been well advised to wrestle its way through them. What we can learn from the LWF's grappling, however, is to be as concerned as our Mission Affirmations declare we are bound to be and in our meetings with each other to assess how well or how poorly we are living them out.

In this same area a great deal of attention was given to another perplexing problem, the church's responsibility to help shape governmental actions and to criticize existing policies when they are contrary to the Word of God. Withdrawal under Romans 13 is not the whole answer if we are sent into the world of which the governments obviously are a part. Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms was discussed extensively. One does not treat Luther's teaching fairly if he dismisses its validity too easily, as many people are willing to do, especially among the youth. But neither does one do it justice if it becomes an easy excuse for refusal to become involved in giving testimony to the high and the mighty and if he thereby fails to make the good witness which might condemn them,

as our Lord did before Pontius Pilate. This discussion resulted in the very practical action of appointing a delegation to speak with the Brazilian government to point out which of its alleged actions and present policies are intolerable under the justice of God and are therefore properly condemned by the church as it is represented by the LWF. Resolutions were also adopted condemning all governments which resort to repression and other inhuman actions and thereby fail to recognize the dignity of man under the God who is man's Creator. These resolutions posed a real difficulty for those who are sent into the world behind the iron curtain, but they were bravely accepted as consistent with the mission of the church.

Should we feel at least a little uneasy with our emphasis on "Render unto God the things that are God's," to the exclusion of "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's"? Dare we content ourselves with theological discussions that easily become an exercise in self-satisfaction? Something like Nazism can flourish under the warm, if not hot, air that such discussions generate because it never becomes a blast conveying God's judgment on the sinfulness, ungodliness, and idolatry of men wherever these take root. How fully are we responsible for the conditions that we lament in our country when we hook on like cabooses to whatever is the great train of popular opinion and politically oriented measures for the good of this, our native land, on which we ask God to bestow His blessings? Did God bless Israel through Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos? Is He still able so to bless our country if the spirit of these prophets has been tamed by us so that we endorse and support that which hastens and even abets our doom? There was something like that kind of church with its prophets also in Jeremiah's day. These churchly spokesmen supported those in power and pointed to their material well-being as proof that their cries of "Peace, peace!" were justified because God was obviously blessing what was going on and their current prosperity made a liar out of any prophet of doom. Regardless of appearances, there was no peace because God had declared war on His rebellious and disobedient people who had been convinced by the false church that they were still the chosen of God. Are the things which belong to our peace also hid from our eyes? Do we come in the name of the Lord who can only weep over those who do not recognize the day of their visitation? The LWF assembly at least was not content to ride on the coattails of every government or to endorse every governmental pronouncement and action. It at least spoke clearly under God to all who would listen, and it backed its voice with appropriate action. Being sent by our Lord into the world always involves risk, even the risk of being wrong. But being sent means going and daring in the Lord's name while living in forgiveness for any wrong that a self-satisfied quietism will never commit.

Sent into the world, the church cannot remain aloof from the world, because it obeys and trusts its Sender, who prays for it that it may be kept from the evil of the world. How does this involve the church in another area that often has escaped the church's attention, man's environment, the earth on which we live? The church surely knows that God has given man the charge to care for the earth and not to exploit it. Can the church then stand idly by and let sinful abuse destroy what God has given to be His blessing for men, without calling for that repentance which changes attitudes also to God's earth? The church may not have the scientific knowledge which it needs to assess all the facts, but it does know the God in whom we live and move and have our being. He is the God who is the Creator and the Sustainer of man through the means which He has provided. He is the God who opens His hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing.

It is this God who is being ignored and despised when we pollute our earth, abuse its treasures, make it uninhabitable, and thereby deny that it is the Lord's with all its fullness. The LWF's concern about ecology and environment was not expressed in this way, but it at least prompted this observer to take a look under God in a direction that had never occurred to him. And isn't this one of the ways in which the body of Christ is edified in love? The different members help each other to see where they have been blind and to hear where they have been deaf and to serve where they have failed to reach out and to recognize where they are being sent when their sentness becomes so circumscribed that it no longer encompasses the world.

There never was any danger that the assembly might get so far out into left field that it would no longer be in the ball park that is called the church. One would have thought that the theologians would have been the safeguard against that. There were plenty of theologians there, and what else are theologians for! But it always came as something of a shock to hear the leaders and the representatives of the Lutheran Church in the developing countries bring everything back into proper focus under the Gospel. Whatever was said and done and resolved, they insisted that it had to be in the service of the Gospel to avoid being merely a refined humanitarianism of which others were perfectly capable, perhaps even more capable than the church. "Why is it so much easier for us to get money for institutions than for preaching the Gospel?" That penetrating question was asked by one of the black leaders from Africa. It is a question that might well be pertinently asked up and down our Synod. On one occasion a heated debate was held as to whether the word "mission" should be included in the name of one of the divisions of the LWF. Again it was the so-called third world (a term which its inhabitants thoroughly rejected) that made the impassioned plea for its retention. The word was dropped because of its possible misunderstanding among the developed cultures of our day, but everything implied in that word was doubly underscored as basic to the purpose and the function of all the work of the LWF. The word "mission" properly belongs in the name of all its divisions because all of them are part of the Lord's sending and are dedicated to His being Lord of all to the glory of God the Father.

Even a casual observer had to notice the simplicity and the forthrightness of those to whom the News was still new and the Good had to do first, last, and always with Jesus Christ. One of the most impassioned pleas for evangelism that this observer ever heard came in the halting and broken English of an Indonesian. He spoke under a compulsion that is often missing in theological discussions and with the urgency of one who had recently come from the feet of St. Paul. If we are no longer proclaimers of Jesus Christ as the sole Savior and only Lord of man, it is doubtful whether we properly know Him, and it can be debated whether we are the church that He has sent into the world. One had the feeling of being caught up again in something elemental, with all the unstudied power of great tides and rushing currents, representative of a mighty movement that had permitted this man to withdraw for a while into the quieter ponds of assembly stillness but that would surely thrust him again into that great wave which is the church's impact on his land. And then one could understand why on a given Sunday not too long ago the police had to direct traffic so that over a thousand Indonesians could march in their new white robes to be washed clean by the water of Baptism. And under the earthshaking quality of this mighty witness one could not help but wonder if we have become only an exhausted remnant of the church — tiredly going through our little motions, with some-

thing less than exuberance observing our religious forms, and with anything but a holy contagion talking about rather than telling the News that is Good.

The Roman Catholic Church was also at the assembly with observers, and Cardinal Willebrands, president of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, addressed the assembly. It was good to hear him speak so highly of Martin Luther, and it was equally good to hear Dr. Kent Knutson, president of Wartburg Seminary, respond forthrightly and without servility. The encounter was church to church and truth to truth. We would do well, however, to reflect on at least one of the cardinal's remarks. He said: "Today it has become a matter of course that no church can be indifferent to what happens in another church." It struck this observer as one of those truisms that cannot be refuted but to which we really and practically do not subscribe, as our indifference testifies. As Lutherans we have never claimed to have bottled up the Spirit of God for ourselves. As Lutherans we confess that He blows where He wills. But we do at times give the impression that His breath is confined to our mouth and that He blows where and as *we* will. This is not a plea for an easy ecumenicity that finally means nothing; it is only an observation of one who was asked to observe and in the observing knew himself to be privileged and blessed and, hopefully, instructed further in what it means to be sent into the world by Him who was sent of the Father.

We Missouri Synod observers were publicly asked why we were not members of the LWF, and the only possible answer was publicly given: "We evidently were not ready for membership because our Denver convention voted not to join, even though the LWF at Helsinki framed its constitution in such a way that we could come in under it and even though our Commission on Theology and Church Relations studied possible membership in it and assured us that it would not be wrong." Perhaps this is the way it must be for now. The LWF is an attempt at expressing unity where we have it, and unity cannot be advanced by creating more divisions. If membership in the LWF would divide our Synod, it would not serve the purpose of membership in the LWF. Our own need at the present time is for unity that grows out of the word of reconciliation. The certainty of our reconciliation to God is attested by our genuine reconciliation with each other, and we dare close no doors that our Lord Himself has opened. We may study to determine if the doors have been opened by the Lord or whether we are in a position to go through them. But we always recognize that as church we still are not what we shall be because we are church only under that Lord who is still working and making all things new. He is the Lord who will (a certainty that lies in the future) build His church. In the meanwhile we are His church that continues to hear Him give us our being, our purpose, and our task: "As Thou didst send Me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

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