

New Morality—An Attack On The Church?
RICHARD J. SCHULTZ

Can Expository Preaching Still be
Relevant In These Days?
MARK J. STEEGE

As New-Born Babies
HAROLD H. BULS

The LWF At Evian—Some Observations
JOBST SCHONE

Preaching
HENRY J. EGGOLD

Falling From Faith In Christ, Of The
Church, And Of The Lutheran Reformation:
An Article On The Ordination Of Women
WOLFGANG BUSCHER

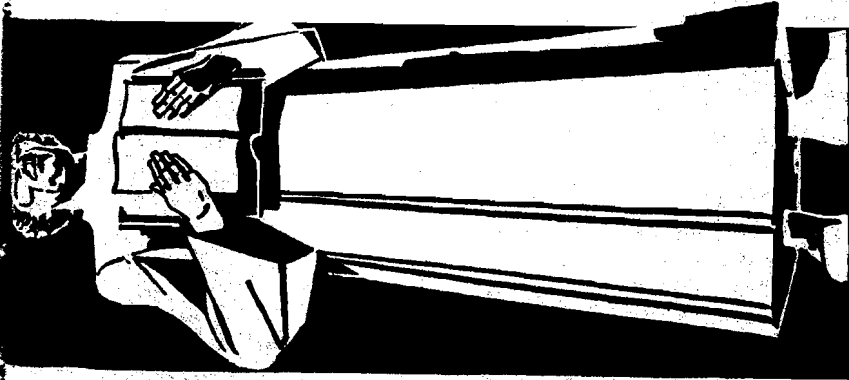
Theological Refractions

Book Reviews

Index, Volume 34

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The LWF At Evian— Some Observations

JOBST SCHONE

The Background of the Fifth Assembly of the LWF

NO ASSEMBLY OF the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has been as controversial as the one held at Evian. It suffered criticism before it convened, while it met, and after its adjournment. The meeting place, the working method and the results were and remain controversial.

The Executive Committee of the LWF had chosen for the Fifth General Assembly a theme which proved to be most explosive: *Sent Into The World*. As President Schiøtz stated in his opening presentation, the Executive Committee was unanimous in its conviction that the emphasis must be placed on the words "into the world." But it was this "world" that almost threw the General Assembly off the track before it got under way. The meeting place had to be changed twice, first from Weimar, East Germany, to Porto Alegre, Brazil, finally from there at the last minute to Evian on Lake Geneva, France.

The meeting at Evian hardly offered any continuity with the work or theme of the previous assembly held in Helsinki in 1963. Such continuity must be found more in the ecumenical conferences of the last few years, particularly the "World Conference on Church and Society" in Geneva 1966, and the assembly of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala 1968. But the question of whether the church has the right to engage in political, economic or social questions, was not thoroughly enough discussed at Uppsala or at Evian. This led some at Evian to point out that in the topics of deliberation and in the formulation of answers there was no noteworthy difference to what had been done at Uppsala. Now and then some asked why the LWF held its own General Assembly? What were the specific and distinctive contributions of the LWF? Had not everything been discussed already in another place? Dr. Wölber, the Bishop of Hamburg, raised the question, "Are we giving ade-

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quate expression to the fact that we are a *Lutheran* World Federation?"

The Makeup of the Fifth Assembly of the LWF

From 82 member churches and from new-member Lutheran Churches, union and other denominations came 216 delegates, 33 official visitors, 19 observers, 112 advisors to Evian. Joining them were 76 members of the LWF staff and 119 representatives of the press. This makes a total of 575 participants, or slightly more than half the number present at Helsinki. Every third visitor of the Assembly came from the so-called 'Third World'. Noteworthy was that the average age was 44.6 years, the lowest of any assembly in LWF history. 33 youth delegates, all with a seat and vote in the General Assembly, were less than 28 years of age. The youngest was 17.

The presence of the young people's delegation was audible though not always intelligible. They pressed the Assembly continually to take a definite action in specific cases of misery in the world. Their influence dare not be underestimated. On the other hand, these young men were obviously unconcerned about the confessional aspect of the LWF.

Evian was designed as a working conference. The worship services were held in the local Roman Catholic parish church. But neither the worship services nor some of the excellent Bible studies at the beginning of each day nor the daily closing devotions in the assembly hall had a noticeable influence on the Assembly. The real work lay entirely in the presentations and discussion in the plenary assembly and the sections. The plenary assembly was introduced to the problematics of a theme by means of formal presentations. Then the participants were divided into three sections and fifteen sub-sections. Beside these plenary sectional sessions there were open hearings about the work done in the LWF Departments over the last several years. In addition, there were topically oriented evening sessions, e.g., ecumenical evening, session on "The Church and Communication", youth evening, etc.

The Theme of the Fifth Assembly of the LWF

The main presentation before the plenary meeting was made by Prof. Heinz Eduard Tödt, instructor of social ethics in the Theological Faculty at the University of Heidelberg. His topic was "Creative Discipleship in the Crisis of the Present World." His presentation set the tone for the Assembly and gave it its major emphasis. This can be summed up as the call to the Christian to responsibility in society and politics. The other emphasis was found in an ecumenical outreach on all sides. Several essays developed the ecumenical direction.

Tödts' offered three major theses in his essay: 1. The History of Humanity as Theological Dimension of the Message of Justification. 2. Basic Characteristics of the Present Crisis in Humanity. 3. Criteria for our Orientation. Tödt saw such standards to be: a)

“world changing reason” which dominates modern science and technology must be called to a humane responsibility; here theology has the duty to become the “core of crystallizing many sciences and scientists”; b) “the productive meaning of the doctrine of the two kingdoms” must be brought to fullest effect; not that it stands opposed to change but in its call also to take up political responsibility according to the example of the Great Reformer himself; and finally c) “the criteria of true humanity must be discovered in the mission of Jesus.” “In Jesus and his destiny we confront the image of the true, complete man; his person shows us criteria that should direct our search for the image of man for which we in the future are responsible.”

In this section Tödt proposed, in opposition to traditional theology, a new concept of sin. Sin today must be measured on the failure over against the future. Sin “today becomes primarily visible where man fails in his mission and in his purpose. That is to say concretely: where man as steward of the earth makes structures and conditions in this world that are unworthy of man . . .” From this position, Tödt makes several concrete deductions, of which all pointed in the direction of taking up immediate social and political responsibility: in matters of human rights, of racial discrimination, of the development of non-industrial nations, the reduction of “imperialistic behavioural patterns in politics and the economic field.”

Tödt’s theological theses are significant, though they were hardly new. Several critical questions must be asked. What is the advantage of substituting the relationship of man to his fellow man for the relationship of man to God? What reactions will there be if the individual is understood primarily as a product of his environment and society? On what does Tödt base his anthropology? Is it the result of Marxist theory, which values the individual as “the ensemble of the conditions in society” (Marx)? Can we uncritically adopt such a theory? It is quite difficult to understand how Tödt could assert the claim that “in earlier times man’s sin was proven by his deviations from pre-set regulations.” The teaching on original sin, as found in Article II of Augsburg Confession, is much more profound on this point. Tödt’s Christological statements will also have to be examined in detail. Does Christology for him shrivel to a mere assertion that the Christ is now only the point of orientation in the search for the man of the future? Does He not have a merely exemplary position? Is He not only some sort of model? If so, why should not the person of Jesus be exchangeable for another person in history? Does Christology in this case still holds its dominating position as the center of all Christian theology?

Admittedly, Tödt wanted to avoid radicalism. He was concerned about the danger, that Christendom either withdraws from or loses to the world. In this case faith and works would be totally separated. But what is Tödt’s new methodological approach? It would hardly be fair to Tödt if we were to understand his position as a complement to the “classic” concept of justification, Christology,

and the doctrine of salvation. He is not interested in reviving what has been forgotten or reassembling the pieces. His remarks indicate an entirely different purpose. We must examine whether his method has a Biblical basis, whether it can be harmonized with the Confessions (presupposing that they still set a standard today), and what its consequences will be. This was neither done at Evian, nor could it have been done. This is a task which faces us now.

A view opposing Tödt's was unexpectedly presented by the Bishop of Hamburg, Dr. Wölber, three days before adjournment, "On the Responsibility of the Individual." He pointed to "the chaos of the individual structure" of man which demands "not only a new consciousness, but also a change of his nature and will by means of a new relation (of man) to his origin and to his destination." "Therefore we appeal to all to search for God anew, to search for Him in Him who is known to us as Jesus Christ, and also to pray anew and to listen to His word." "We are prompted to witness to our fellow man that Christians believe in a totally new creation, and that they look for it in the prayers and in their worship. As we consider all this, we call crisis shaken humanity not only to responsibility within society, but to a life of faith and of prayer. We are convinced that the background of our misery is the catastrophe of our relation to God . . ."

This declaration with its rejection of any process optimism was not simply swallowed hook, line and sinker at Evian, but it led to one of the most lively debates of the plenary assembly. In the end the Assembly declared its "agreement" with the proposal and recommended the communication of the text with certain additions to all member churches.

Section I at Evian, working with the theme "Sent with the Gospel," faced the whole problem of communication. It was unable to arrive at a clear definition of what was meant by "Gospel." But there was a warning against stressing action to the detriment of proclamation. Christian action can never be alone but the word must be added to action "if it is to be more than humanitarian altruism."

In the debate on missions, strikingly enough it was the representatives of the younger churches who repeatedly criticized the socio-political engagement of the LWF. Instead they demanded a proclamation of the content of the "classic" doctrine of reconciliation, redemption through Christ and the forgiveness of sins. Since then, these demands of the younger churches have been rather cleverly dismissed. Jürgen Jeziorowski has stated that the "Third World" representatives were paying back a debt to the conservative theologians from Europe and the USA. "Bad theology, which at one time was exported, was delivered back in this direct way." It is astounding how frivolously the voices of the younger churches can be dismissed. These were the voices which at one time were tirelessly called upon as the chief witnesses for the necessity of a new theological and ecumenical orientation.

A special "ecumenical evening" was devoted to the relationship between the Roman and the Lutheran Churches. The major speaker that evening was Jan Cardinal Willebrands, President of the *Secretariat for Christian Unity*. As he spoke of the theme *Sent Into The World*, he reminded the Assembly that the church "is not sent into the world with empty hands," but rather she brings "the Gospel of Christ." From this it follows, that the church "must be the conscience of the world" and dare not identify itself with the world. "The dignity of man," said Willebrands, "reaches its highest degree of completion in man's recognition of and prayer to God"; and "the way and the absolute prerequisite for this turning of man to God . . . is the reconciliation accomplished by Christ between man with God." In all this he made constant reference to the Holy Scriptures—something that was different from the usual fare. In other presentations, reference to the Holy Scriptures was missing.

Then the Cardinal turned his attention to Roman-Lutheran relations in the present and the future. He did not doubt that "despite all future perspectives . . . Catholic-Lutheran dialogue . . . must always refer back to the 16th century." He cautiously reflected on the person of the Great Reformer: "In the course of the centuries the person of Martin Luther has from the Catholic side not always been correctly adjudged nor has his theology always been correctly reflected." But of particular note was his statement: "In a meeting, which has chosen as its theme *Sent Into The World*, it is good to reflect on a man for whom the doctrine of justification was the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. In this let him be our common teacher, that God must always remain Lord and that our most important human response must remain absolute trust in and the worship of God."

The second speaker for the "ecumenical evening" was the American theologian, Dr. Kent Knutson, since then elected president of the American Lutheran Church. His topic was "The Reaction of the Lutheran Churches to the Roman Catholic Church and its Theology Today." The ALC president insisted that the pressing world problems facing Christians "dwarf the luxury of subtle theological distinctions." Dr. Knutson himself already seemed to have renounced these subtle theological distinctions.

The problem of "ecumenical responsibility" was dealt with in Section II. The urgency of Christian unity was said to be part of the fulfillment of the church's mission. Basic ecclesiological questions were not debated. The "ecumenical" climate prevented a consideration of possible non-theological factors of the search for unity. It did not permit discussion of the problem of false doctrine or the *ecclesia falsa*. "Our present-day difficulties and dispersion situation make concentration on the fundamental issues necessary and not on the work towards a *summa doctrinae*." Section II recommended the expansion of ecumenical relations to the Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals and the syncretistic cults in South American and Africa through new contacts, study sessions and dialogue on

local and regional basis. Alongside Section II an "Ad Hoc Committee on Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue" worked on a report which the plenary assembly later received and which, on the basis of previous doctrinal discussions, recommends the establishment of a Lutheran-Union-Reformed "Concord" with the goal of full fellowship between the churches involved. This "Concord" should contain:

- a) a declaration that the churches agree in their understanding of the content of the Gospel;
- b) a declaration that the doctrinal condemnations in the Confessions no longer apply to the present doctrinal stance of the partner; and
- c) a declaration of pulpit and altar fellowship between the churches involved.

For this conception one need not search long in church history for a parallel. This is quite similar to the classic 19th century "Union" between Lutheran and Reformed in Germany. Arnold Mobbs, representative of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, told the Assembly: "I am very, very pleased with this document." In a similar vein were the comments of two representatives of German union churches, whose comments were prominently featured by the Press Office of the LWF. Significantly the reactions of the President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and of the General President of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia to the Assembly action were passed over in total silence by the Press Office of the LWF.

Results and Consequences of the Fifth Assembly of the LWF

Three characteristics mark this Assembly.

1. A departure for the LWF in the direction of social and political responsibility both as a world federation as well as individual member churches. Speaking to sociological, political or economic issues will raise not only the question of the LWF's and its member churches' legitimacy and professional competence, but also the question of the theological basis and the delineation over against attempts of a similar nature from another side.

2. The expansion of ecumenical relations with all practical consequences. If previous declarations of the LWF and its former assemblies saw as their goal the union of world Lutheranism in faith and confession, then a fundamental change has taken place. The ecumenical movement, at least in its institutionalized form, has apparently given stronger impulses to the LWF than its confessional commitment and its member churches. Already one thing seems evident: those churches, who until now for reasons of their confessional stance have stayed away from the LWF, will in the future be even less inclined to bear mutually the responsibility to seek admission to a world federation which in an ever clearer way plays the role of a preliminary step toward total integration into the World Council of Churches.

3. The end of striving for a theological consensus. The former General Secretary and now Executive Committee Member Dr. Schmidt-Clausen expressed it this way: "In Minneapolis, world Lutheranism for the first time—and we fear, for the last time in a long while—made the attempt to seek a theological consensus and to formulate it."

If we are to make a general characterization—at least in some preliminary way—then we will have to point out the general uncertainty, so evident at Evian. This is, in the final analysis, the result of a theological uncertainty: The pluralism of different and opposing theologies in which a back reference to a common foundation can hardly be detected any longer, have undermined any consensus. The formulation of the theme for Evian can serve as example: *Sent Into The World*. Missing is any statement about the "subject", about Him who does the sending. Is it Christ? Is it Christ *vere Deus et vere homo*—or just *vere homo*? This question, to which now there is no common answer within the Lutheran World Federation, separates the "spirits". On this answer everything, including ecclesiology, depends.

This fellowship of Lutheran churches, which the LWF supposedly wants to be, seems to be no longer (or at least in ever decreasing measure) held together by doctrinal consensus and common expression of faith. Its functioning seems now primarily maintained by its organizational apparatus.