

G.E. Bergemann: An Evangelical
Approach To The Ministry

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Church History

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Reverend G.E. Bergemann was an impressive man. Although he was called to his heavenly home more than twenty years ago, he is still vividly remembered. Mention his name to someone who knew him and you will get an immediate reaction. Just mentioning his name to some people caused their eyes to light up. One person quickly replied, "Oh! He was a striking man!" He was a man whose appearance and demeanor commanded attention from those around him. There is no question about it, G.E. Bergemann was not an ordinary man. This writer has received the impression from everyone he interviewed that he was a great man and a great minister. The key to his ministry was his evangelical approach. He was motivated by a sincere appreciation of the Gospel. "The truth of objective justification was of great concern for him."¹ It is this evangelical approach to the ministry with which we concern ourselves in this paper. It was through an evangelical approach to the ministry that G.E. Bergemann influenced the church in Fond du Lac and the Synod at large.

The following words are intended to be a biographical picture painted from the memories of those who knew him well. We are not going to present the type of biographical data usually reserved for obituary notices. What we seek to convey are our personal opinions of his effect upon the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in the Fond du Lac area and at large. We therefore consider: G.E. Bergemann: An Evangelical Approach to the Ministry.

I.

It may seem rather obvious that a man who serves as president of a church body for twenty four years would have some effect upon that church body. Such a man would also necessarily leave his stamp upon the churches in the community where he served actively for forty eight years. Bergemann influenced both of these groups in a very positive way helping to shape them with his evangelical approach. His ministry in Fond du Lac and the Synod are a striking example of the Lord blessing His church through an evangelical minister.

People like to describe his appearance first of all. When you first hear about his outward appearance he may sound like somewhat of a dandified gentleman. This impression is true to an extent. He is certainly not your typical parson! If all of the pastors who ever served in the Wisconsin Synod were gathered together, he perhaps would stand out conspicuously from the rest. From his very arrival he would attract the attention as he pulled up on his white horse, having his black hat firmly planted upon his head and his diamond tie pin flashing in the sun. We would have to admit there is something uncommonly grand about a minister whom the city fathers invite to ride at the head of a parade for a presidential candidate. He was a man who had real class. He took great pride in his appearance even when he was very old.

One might think that a man with such a commanding appearance might disdain to rub elbows with the less genteel. But, "he was no respecter of persons."² Although his appearance may have been such

that lesser men might shy away from his presence at first meeting; yet, a gospel motivated love for people enabled him to reach out to all of his fellow men. He was a people's pastor and his people loved him.³ It was his custom to often stop at the homes of his members just for a visit. Nearly everyone we spoke with said he often had dinner with them. He must have gone out more often for dinner than the modern American!

The greatest part of his ministry was spent at St. Peter's Church in Fond du Lac, which he served from 1899-1947. It was as pastor of this congregation that he made a deep impression upon the Lutheran churches of the area.

Bergemann's evangelical approach to the ministry brought him great popularity. His sermons were filled with Gospel nourishment. His infectious love for people made its impression upon what was already a very solid group of Lutherans. The love for the Gospel he expressed in his life bore fruit in their congregational life.

Having come from the Tomah area where he served four groups each Sunday he was actively involved in establishing new congregations in the Fond du Lac area also. A true missionaries zeal for preaching the gospel burned in his heart. The growth of the community of North Fond du Lac prompted him to endeavor to build a church there. His congregation supported his plan generously with mission gifts and St. Paul's of North Fond du Lac became a reality already in 1901. This was only the beginning of daughter congregations established by St. Peter's while he was the pastor. Three other congregations

were also established within the city limits with his leadership. This concern for mission growth and for assisting daughter congregations financially has persisted to this very day. During his long tenure Fond du Lac was established as an active confessional Lutheran church location. He of course doesn't deserve all of the credit for this expansion. However, we believe the expansion was greatly nurtured by his evangelical approach to the ministry.

Pastor Bergemann also was vitally concerned about Christian education. In St. Peter's congregation he found a group of people who had shown their concern for parochial education for many years. Under his shepherding this parochial school boomed. In 1903 and again in 1925 they were forced to build new schools to keep up with the astounding growth. The number of classrooms was increased from 4 to 10 and by 1921 they had 315 students enrolled.⁴ Much of this increase was due to zealous teachers and the including of the school in the budget rather than on a tuition basis. Again, much of the growth was due to pastor promotion of the benefits of the program. Since the congregation was blessed with fine teachers he left them run the school's affairs. As Mr. Moskop saw it "he didn't help or hinder in the school."⁵

Bergemann's concern for Christian education is most vividly seen from his vital role in establishing a Lutheran High School. In 1926 Winnebago Lutheran High School began operation. In many ways this was Pastor Bergemann's pet. His co-pastor, H.K. Moussa and he really were the sparks that ignited the high school spirit.

Pastor Bergemann was of course the natural leader of the local Lutherans of the Wisconsin Synod since he was of the character previously described and he was Synod President. He was a man of very firm will. "When he was right, he was right no matter what."⁶ Under his firm leadership the high school rapidly took shape and character. He was very influential in who was called for the various teaching positions. The man he picked was the one they called. The man he called came.

All of this, call it politics, can be explained as resulting from his deep commitment to the school. He was always present with his support. The school's welfare was as much a concern for him as the welfare of his own family. Therefore; he used whatever power was at his disposal to get the best for his academy.

Pastor Bergemann's involvement in the academy was typical of his entire approach to the ministry. He gave all he had. He loved his people. His concern was a true shepherd's care. His evangelical approach to the ministry left an enduring influence upon the Lutheran Church in Fond du Lac. He continued and increased his people's zeal for Christ-centered education. His love for the gospel inspired them also with a desire to do the Lord's work. Five churches and five schools in Fond du Lac and North Fond du Lac are daily witnesses to the community of a living active church. A church blessed with leaders like G.E. Bergemann who lived to serve God's people. To Pastor Bergemann God's people were "meine Leute." On the day his wife was passing away he left her side to conduct devotions at Fraunverein.⁷

Zealous to a fault perhaps; but, his evangelical approach to the ministry greatly influenced the Lutheran Church of the Wisconsin Synod in Fond du Lac.

II.

This attitude also had its effect upon the Synod at large. We won't nor could we, gauge his effect upon the Synod and its structure during his tenure as Praesus. We wish to make two closely related interesting points which illustrate this man's influence upon the Synod at large. He did this through individual men and through the seminary.

The need for instructors at Winnebago Lutheran Academy and Bergemann's desire for the best led to a succession of professors at the Academy for which the school may very well be grateful to the Lord. These men who were called to teach there came under the influence of this evangelical pastor.

Pastor Bergemann took an amazing interest in these young ministers and teachers. He seems almost to have been conscious that these men were going to be the church leaders of the future. He did his part to shape the future by sharing with them his experience from the past.

Professor Martin Albrecht tells of a touching example of how deeply involved in the Academy and its teachers Bergemann was. Called to teach high school students four or five different subjects in his first year out of New Ulm was proving to be a most difficult task. Even conducting the choir which was his specialty was proving

to be exasperatingly futile. Futile until Bergemann came up one day and told him, "We're going to Sheboygan. I want you to meet a certain choir director." He then proceeded to introduce him to the Sheboygan High School music director, Hans Schler, whose chorus was reknowned for their ability. The way to get good singing out of a high school chorus was well illustrated and Professor Albrecht, applying what he had learned, proceeded to have a rewarding career with the Academy choir. "If it hadn't been for Bergemann I wonder if I would have been successful there? I was greatly influenced by him. He helped me."⁸

Professor Wilbert Gawrisch responded to our inquiries with the statement: "He was a personality whom I consider it a pleasure to have known."⁹ He had much to say about how Pastor Bergemann affected him. Especially did Pastor Bergemann impress him because of his evangelical attitude toward the ministry and his complete dedication to his people. "His work came first. His duty toward the church may even have been above his family responsibilities."¹⁰

Professor Carl Lawrenz was an intimate friend of Pastor Bergemann. Often even serving as a friendly chauffeur to the elderly pastor. He will readily agree that his Christ-centered approach to the Scriptures, learned at Seminary, was fortified by this dynamic minister. It was Professor Lawrenz and Pastor W. Pless' privilege to be members of a weekly study club with Pastor Bergemann. "Bergemann confessed that he had left his Hebrew slip but he had a very good command of the Greek...We studied Walther's Law and Gospel and

often studied the regular Gospel and Epistle texts...The truth of objective justification was of great concern for him. I can still hear him stress, 'Don't preach a conditional Gospel!'"¹¹

Bergemann loved to associate with these young pastors. "He was fully conversant on the doctrine of church and ministry...He referred us to important articles of the quarterly from the Wauwautosa theology period. He was an avid reader of the quarterly... When you talked with him you talked theology or church affairs."¹² "He influence young pastors in a personal way by talking with them and discussing the work of the church and theological matters."¹³

Professors Albrecht, Gawrisch and Lawrenz all stated how impressed they were with his preaching. The Gospel content of his sermons was outstanding. He never wrote out his sermons after he left his first congregation in Bay City. This had some connection with a nervous breakdown he had. He would prepare the text study dilligently and on Sunday morning he would then take an early walk and mentally go through his sermons "writing" and memorizing. "He was a forceful preacher and effective in his variation of volume."¹⁴ "He was a dramatic preacher."¹⁵ Professors Lawrenz and Albrecht felt that his conducting of the liturgy was atrocious; but, his preaching more than made up for it.

These impressions of Bergemann by the above mentioned professors lead to what seems to this writer a fascinating point. No less than five members of the present seminary faculty at WEL Seminary were intimate acquaintances of Pastor Bergemann. As young pastors

they were no doubt much influenced by his evangelical approach to the ministry. We are sure that the reader would confess with the other four that Pastor G.E. Bergemann left a lasting impression upon him. Can there be any denial that G.E. Bergemann has had an effect upon our Seminary? Not only has his evangelical approach to the ministry influenced these men; but, as chairman of the board of control of the Seminary from 1933-1947 he greatly influenced policy here on the hill. An intimate friend of Professor John Meyer relates that it was the leadership of G.E. Bergemann which prompted the Seminary call sent to and accepted by our present president Carl Lawrenz in 1944. Though dead twenty one years next week, he influences the evangelical spirit of our Seminary today through the men upon whom he left his imprint.

In other important synodical affairs of the last twenty years he has had an indirect role. His historical judgment on modern Lutheran church relations were profoundly accurate. The present Commission on Inter-Church Relations is composed of ten men. No less than five of these were close fellow pastors with our subject.

The bulk of G.E. Bergemann's ministry was carried out when our Synod was much smaller. He was an outstanding, perhaps the outstanding, man of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in the first half of the twentieth century. He was a great blessing of God to His Church. What made him great was the grace of God working in his heart a deep appreciation of the Gospel. His ministry could be characterized as evangelical.

One can't help but be amazed at the dedication of Pastor Bergemann to seine Leute and his synod. This evangelical attitude to the ministry with which he was blessed still affects the Lutherans in the community in which he lived and labored. Even more amazing is the influence he has perchance had upon our Synod and its Seminary. In a moment of uncharacteristic unprofessionalism our history professor told us, "Make him look like a good guy." We could be historical and hopefully were. He didn't need to be made a "good guy," by God's grace he was.

ENDNOTES

¹Professor Carl Lawrenz, interviewed by Robert Gurgel, (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Campus), 9:00 P.M., May 1, 1975.

²Mr. & Mrs. A.A. Moskop, interviewed by Robert Gurgel, (Fond du Lac, Wisconsin), 1:30 P.M., March 23, 1975.

³Professor Wilbert Gawrisch, interviewed by Robert Gurgel, (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Campus), 9:30 A.M., April 29, 1975.

⁴Celebrating a Century in Christ, 1858-1958, St. Peter's Centennial Booklet.

⁵Moskop, Interview.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Mrs. Herman J. Jackson, interviewed by Robert Gurgel, (Fond du Lac, Wisconsin), 2:30 P.M., April 23, 1975.

⁸Professor Martin Albrecht, interviewed by Robert Gurgel (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Campus), 10:25 P.M., April 29, 1975.

⁹Gawrisch, Interview.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Lawrenz, Interview.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Gawrisch, Interview.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Lawrenz, Interview.

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2. Celebrating a Century in Christ, 1858-1958, St. Peter's Centennial Booklet.
3. Gawrisch, Professor Wilbert, interviewed by Robert Gurgel, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Campus, 9:30 A.M., April 29, 1975.
4. Jackson, Mrs. Herman J., interviewed by Robert Gurgel, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, 2:30 P.M., April 23, 1975.
5. Lawrenz, Professor Carl, interviewed by Robert Gurgel, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Campus, 9:00 P.M., May 1, 1975.
6. Moskop, Mrs. & Mr. A.A., interviewed by Robert Gurgel, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, 1:30 P.M., March 23, 1975.
7. ^{Gerhard Pieper}
Joh. P. Meyer, "In Memoriam", Northwestern Lutheran, June 13, 1954. p. 181
8. Synod Proceedings, 1908-1910.
9. Synod Proceedings, 1933.