

RETRACING THE STEPS FROM ST LOUIS TO ST PIUS

A Biography of Dr. George Hans Liebenow

Senior History Paper
Professor Fredrick
May 15, 1989

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INTRODUCTION

This is a biography. A brief history of the life of a man. Its title is intended to signify a journey between what this writer considers to be two radically different theologies. "St. Louis" represents the conservative, confessional, Lutheran theology which this writer believes faithfully exposes the truths of God's Word. "St Pius" represents a departure from that theology, in whatever sense it may. And so this biography is more than just a document of names and dates, places and events. It is a look at one man's life which is intended to instruct and educate this writer about the journey of theologians in one's *habitus practicus*.

As a seminary student who sits at the feet of men who also began their journeys at "St Louis," the question naturally arises as to why journeys which start at the same basic point should end up so different. This paper is not intended to give specific answers to that question, but it is intended to let the reader have a look at one man's journey and form one's own opinions.

The discoveries may not be simple or obvious. Rather they may be painful or at least stimulating. This writer has personally benefited from retracing the steps. He has been stimulated to look carefully at each step and measure it

according to the Lord's own measure which Christ himself gave us
in Jn 8:31-32,

If you hold to my teachings, you are really my disciples.
Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you
free.

Faithfulness to God's word is the final answer to all life's
perplexing questions and it is God's road map for the theological
journey that every human will have to assume. May this brief
look so stimulate such responsibility.

Retracing the Steps From St Louis to St Pius

In 1919, a year remembered for Woodrow Wilson, Karl Barth and race riots in Chicago, George Hans Liebenow was born in Racine, Wisconsin to Otto and Olga Liebenow. The day was Oct 30, the eve of the festival of the Reformation.

George Hans was the second of 10 children. His father was a fairly successful meat-cutter who was involved in farming, savings & loan management, and a family owned meat market, among other ventures. Otto G. Liebenow was not only a fairly successful businessman but also very religious. He was very active in supporting the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. He generously supported the mission work in India, providing photographic equipment in order to document the work there for those in the United States. He also generously supported Pastor Jonathan Udoo Ekong from Nigeria, Africa so that he could attend the seminary at Greensboro, N.C.. Otto was also an active lay-minister throughout his later life. The Liebenow connection with these two missions and controversy in which they were involved would play a roll in the direction of Dr. Liebenow's theological journey.

Otto Liebenow impressed Dr. Liebenow in many ways, some negative and some positive. One positive impression left on him was that of Otto being non-polemic against either the Roman Catholics or the "other" Lutherans (ie. those not of the Synodical Conference) in an age of rampant prejudice and

hostility. A very negative impression was the strictness and authoritarian nature of the man. These impressions would be carried with Dr. Liebenow as he grew in his theology.

Otto and Olga's Christian convictions led them to desire Christian education for their children. They sent all of their 10 children to Synod schools for that education. It was here that George Hans Liebenow began his journey.

Up until 1932 George Liebenow attended St John's Lutheran Church and School in Racine which was under the direction of Rev. Dr. J.F. Boerger and Rev. Walther Hellmann, and a member of the Synodical Conference. The school was under the principalship of Dr. F.L. Weber. In Racine there was a very close working relationship between members of the Synodical Conference and particularly between the pastors of St. John's and Pastor H. Volkert of the Wisconsin Synod church, First Evangelical Lutheran Church. The relationship between the churches and workers has been described as "the closest of friends." This close working relationship would also leave some impressions in regard to fellowship that stayed with Dr. Liebenow as he carried on with his journey.

Foreshadowings of Dr. Liebenow's future were manifest even at the young age of a grade-schooler. He tells of challenges made to his catechism teacher about things he was taught. He relates this characterization: "Being of an inquisitive and belligerent nature I challenged my parents and my teachers and even the pastor in the congregational class for so-called

biblical proof of religious tenets." Later in a grade school farewell letter to F.L. Weber, he would acknowledge his tendency to challenge authority in humble reconsideration.

Dr. Liebenow continued his education at the synodical prep school and college, Concordia, Milwaukee. The president of the school at that time was G. Christian Barth, and the faculty included professors Ewald Plass and Leroy Rincker.

Dr. Liebenow's first encounter with Barth was at the Wednesday afternoon Bible class where he remembers being addressed as "scalawags" and where the class "enjoyed" a very strict atmosphere.

In Dr. Liebenow's opinion there was a very stringent code of conduct at Concordia. The classes were governed by an unwritten rule that one believe the professors, without challenge, and that was that. "Our theology...it was Luther says, Walther says, Pieper says." This provided a natural antagonism for Dr. Liebenow. He felt a control on thought tightened by those who "did the same thing as they did yesterday, believed the same thing as they believed yesterday." And looking back describes the tradition of this theology in these terms: "they believed what Pieper believed, and Pieper believed what Walther believed, and Walther believed what Luther believed, and to deviate or to question was an absolute no-no."

This atmosphere of rigid authoritarianism and Dr Liebenow's rather anti-authoritarian attitude produced a less than comfortable situation in some ways while he was at Concordia,

though in general he acknowledges it as a good and beneficial stage of his journey.

There was a time at Concordia when, as related by Dr. Liebenow, he felt a bit of reprieve from this strictness. President Leroy Rinkert was in his view a "real progressive" who in the late 1930's introduced new ideas like a course in economics and advanced progressive ideas for administration. He allowed certain liberties for the students which, while departing from the norm, impressed Dr. Liebenow as fair, respectable and non-rigid.

At St. Louis Seminary Dr. Liebenow studied at the feet of the Missouri greats. His professors included Dr. Walter A. Maier, Dr. J.T. Mueller, Dr. William Arndt, L. Fuerbringer D.D., Th. Graebner D.D., and J.H.C. Fritz D.D. Here too, Dr. Liebenow enjoyed much of his professors' teaching and instruction, always bothered, though, by strict and dogmatic demands made on him and his fellow classmates and on Scripture. He especially deplored the "regurgitative" teaching methods that some of his professors employed (ie. I'll teach; you regurgitate it back to me and we'll get along [my interpretation]).

Dr. Liebenow graduated from St Louis Seminary in May of 1944 and on May 27 of that year was married to Doris Ann Esslinger of ~~Nebraska~~ ^{Nebraska} ~~Nebraska~~. Forty-three days later Dr. Liebenow and his new bride would find themselves in Rawlins, Wyoming where this St. Louis graduate was ordained by Pastor J.E. Lutze and installed as missionary-at-large.

Wyoming at that time was quite wide open in terms of Missouri Synod congregations with three congregations in 60,000 square miles. Rawlins was a town of 7,000 people with 43 Lodges and fraternal societies and Pastor Liebenow worked to reestablish friendly relations within this community. In Wyoming he enjoyed a very practical ministry as he served a group of close to 100 baptized and about 30 communicants. There he actively participated in the local ministerial union and was generally involved in community interest.

In the year after Pastor Liebenow's installation and ordination, the year World War II ended, a very significant document appeared which would seriously affect his theological journey. This document was the statement of the 44 entitled, "Speaking the Truth in Love." The signers of this statement were prominent men in the Missouri Synod and their action, along with his own long study and reflection on its message would lead him to reevaluate the direction of his journey.

In 1948 he relinquished his work in Wyoming which was taken over by a new missionary, Pastor W. Kurth, and he returned to St. Louis to work in the public relations department of the International Lutheran Hour ministry. Here he was actively involved with public relations for the Lutheran Hour and traveled throughout Missouri's Western District advancing the scope, work and support of this very vital ministry. During this time he again enjoyed the chance to work with his old seminary professor, Walter A. Maier until the year the great speaker unexpectedly

died, 1950.

In 1950, a year of Truman, McCarthy and Korean unrest, Dr. Liebenow made another change from the Lutheran Hour by way of a call to the position of hospital chaplain and inner-city missionary in St. Louis. Here he was working in close connection with the Lutheran Mission Association of Greater St. Louis which had committed itself to aid for the missions of the area. He especially centered his efforts at the Resurrection and the Good Samaritan Chapels in the predominantly black inner city. Here they provided essentially spiritual care together with some social services.

At this time Dr. Liebenow was also working with the seminary as a kind of field director who assisted the seminary in providing seminarians with an introduction to clinical work, for instance at Homer Philips Hospital in St. Louis. His classes usually consisted of between 25-30 students. This would be the mainstay of his work for the next seven years, working with the students from the Seminary and among the impoverished in the inner city of St. Louis.

Besides these other duties Dr. Liebenow was intimately connected with the 1953 formation of a new association within the Missouri Synod which under the guidance of Dr. Andrew Schultze and in close connection with Martin Scharlemann would come to be known as the Lutheran Human Relations Association of America. This association was developed out of the human relations institutes at Valparaiso University (specifically the 4th annual

institute) which were conducted jointly by the St. Louis Lutheran Society for Better Human Relations and the Valparaiso's summer institute programs, and was originally called "The International Society for Better Human Relations." This association was deeply committed to the restoration and preservation of social justice and fairness among all Christians. Dr. Liebenow was editor of the Proceedings of the 1953 Valparaiso University Institute on Human Relations.

The executive committee, elected by the institute members consisted of A.A. Schulze-president, W. Heyne-vice-president, J.C. Ballard-secretary, M.E. Nees-treasurer, M.S. Dickenson, G.H. Liebenow and P. Simon as board members. On February 4, 1954 Pastors Heyne, Liebenow and Simon signed the incorporation papers for the L.H.R.A.A. at East St. Louis, Illinois. His continuing work with the blacks and the rampant prejudices of many people, including Lutherans, would also have a significant affect on his life's journey.

1957 to 1967 Dr. Liebenow's work was characterized by parish work as he was called to be the parish pastor of two different congregations within that time period. First, from 1957 to 1962 he was called to be parish pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church of Cincinnati. Immanuel was medium size (@350), predominantly black (@ 95%), yet less of an inner city church than were Resurrection or Good Samaritan Chapels in St. Louis.

By the end of his ministry at Immanuel, the year Martin Luther King emerged as a champion for desegregation, Dr. Liebenow

had submitted his thesis for the Bachelor of Divinity degree which he attained from St. Louis Seminary's Practical Theology Department. The thesis which was submitted in June of 1957 was entitled, "Attitudes and Policies of the Lutheran Church toward the Negro" and is still used at Valparaiso University for Lutheran/black studies, even though it was somewhat controversial at the time of its presentation. In April 1959 Dr. Liebenow was introduced to a paper written by Scharlemann entitled, "The Bible as Record, Witness and Medium." This paper was not only significant for Dr. Liebenow's journey but also for the Synod's.

Then in 1962 Dr. Liebenow received a call to serve a group of lay people who were in the process of establishing a new church in an area more conveniently located for people in this large metropolitan area of Cincinnati. Starting basically from scratch this group came to be called Peace Lutheran Church, supporting more than 120 baptized and 72 communicant members.

During his work at Immanuel, Dr. Liebenow was carrying on part-time studies at the University of Cincinnati. He studied classics and education at the graduate school from 1958-60. His intention was to focus on New Testament studies and was taught at the feet of classical scholars like the University's New Testament man, Professor Casey, the archeological man, Professor Boltman, and the man famous for his archeological work at Pylos, Professor Carl W. Blegen.

Then in 1960 he began doctoral studies at Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati. There he studied under a distinguished

faculty consisting of men like Dr. Samuel Sandmel, Dr. Isaac Jerusalmi and Dr. Nelson Glueck, among others. Dr. Liebenow was the first student to graduate from Hebrew Union College without a fellowship. His doctoral thesis, submitted February 1, 1967, was titled, "The Septuagint of Zechariah." This thesis was a 158 page comparison of the Septuagint of Zechariah with the Masoretic text, written under the refereeing of Dr. Samuel Sandmel. He was awarded his Ph.D. in that same year.

It was in this period of study that tensions were very high both among races in the United States and among the members of the Synodical Conference. In 1963 the Conference lost two of its members, the ELS and the WELS. This break deeply affected everyone involved.

Through the efforts of Dr. Nelson Glueck, Dr. Liebenow was offered a post-doctorate fellowship from Hebrew Union College to study Palestinian Geography together with Modern and Mishnaic Hebrew in Jerusalem. While there he worked on Qumran materials with the Lutheran Qumran scholar Dr. Hans Kosmala of the Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem.

An important sideline of Dr. Liebenow's work while in Jerusalem from July of 1968 to May of 1969, was the establishing of English language worship services at the Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer. Under the leadership of Mr. Donald Scott, the Executive Director of the Lutheran World Federation, these services were begun and carried on with the help and assistance of Dr. Liebenow.

In 1969 Dr. Liebenow returned to the United States where he was called to teach Old Persian at Mount St Mary's Seminary of the Roman Catholic Diocesan in Cincinnati (He was one of a very few who was able to work with this language). After briefly discussing some essential differences in theology Dr. Liebenow accepted the position and taught there in the 1969 school year. It was in this setting that he met Archbishop Paul Leibold whom Dr. Liebenow remembers as being one of the more influential men in his theological journey.

From 1969 to 1972 Dr Liebenow lectured in Biblical archeology at Xavier University in Cincinnati.

In 1975 Dr. Liebenow attended the Missouri Synod convention in New Orleans. There the Synod was rocked by controversy in which Dr. Liebenow agreed and sided with the Tietjen supporters. He signed the protest, opposed Preus and intimately supported the 1974 walk out of the Seminary faculty and students at St Louis. Dr. Liebenow cites Missouri's general aversion to intellectual progressiveness, its rather arrogant attitudes of theological parochialism and the changes made by the Preus administration as reasons for his ardent support.

The same year saw a rounding off of his official teaching career at St Pius X Seminary of Cincinnati as Biblical Languages Professor.

At the present time he still occasionally lectures emphasizing Intertestamental Literature and History, Old Testament History and interpretation and Semitic Languages. He

is still active in promoting human relationships and understanding. He is also the author of a widely used Bible class on relations between Jews and Christians entitled, "Comfort, Comfort My People..." (Concordia).

Conclusion

In the Introduction of this biography it was stated that the intention of this paper was not to give specific conclusions as to why a diversion has taken place. It is felt that such conclusions would be presumptuous and assuming on the part of this writer. There are, however, some suggestions that this writer has in regard to considering the question at hand. First of all personality plays a very large part in a man's theological journey. As subjective as that may seem, a study of personalities would undoubtedly provide a revealing trend of how people develop in their thoughts, attitudes and actions. This biography also suggests a large role of personality in Dr. Liebenow's journey. Secondly, existential trends, (ex. Intellectualism, racial tensions, weltanschauung) play a large part in a person's development. The feelings and attitudes of the time greatly influence not only the moral attitudes of the day but also the theological. Finally the most significant determiner of a theological journey, in the opinion of this writer, is one's view of God's word. As this view goes, so goes

the journey. Those who hold one view of God's word will find the journey from St. Louis to St. Pius as natural, progressive and encouraging. Those who hold a different view will assess the journey as predictable, untenable and sorrowful. Jesus said,

If you hold to my teachings, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

May the Lord of theological journeys grant this writer the ability to know and hold to his teachings throughout his own theological journey and so be truly free!

Most of the information gathered for this biography comes from first hand discussion with Dr. George Hans Liebenow and papers of his authorship. Other dates, names and information were gathered from interviews with his brother, Robert E. Liebenow, and The Lutheran Annual.

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