

Is the Church Prepared for War

by Gotthard E. Burton, 1937

“**I**n time of peace prepare for war.” This maxim so often used by advocates of large armies and navies might with better propriety and greater urgency be spoken by devotees of peace. There is another preparation than that which is concerned with multiplying “reeking tubes and iron shard”. We mean the preparation of an attitude, a conviction which is in keeping with applied Christianity. That there is need for such a preparation, that it must be done in time of peace, and that proper leadership must be found, are three phases of this question.

The writer is one of the many readers of the COMPANION (Lutheran Companion) who saw active service in the World War I. He scarcely needs look among his souvenirs for certain mementos bestowed upon those “wounded in action” to recall that war is hell-born. Haunting memories only too readily conjure up the past; a rather vivid imagination combines with these memories to cast spectral shades upon the canvas of the future. With the Scottish bard

“...I backward cast my e’e
on prospects drear!
An’ forward tho’ I canna see
I guess and fear!”

The peace of the world is hardly more stable than a pyramid on its apex. It is kept by juggling. Spain is in turmoil. The nations are anxiously watching. To suppose that America cannot be embroiled in another conflict is shutting your eyes to the facts of history. What has happened can happen (again.). Nor is America secure in her strength, nor her geographic isolation. Independence in theory has yielded to interdependence in fact. International commerce, credit, investments, etc., make it impossible for any nation not to be concerned in the affairs of other nations. Moreover, we discern no change of heart or of policy in our own militaristic camp. We have reason to suspect that recent waves of quasi-patriotic propaganda have not risen in the hearts of the people but have been fostered and nourished by selfish interests. Not a few strands of fascist fiber are finding their way into the web of American thought and practice, our vaunted love of democracy notwithstanding. And what of our vastly increased appropriations for bigger and bigger weapons in all classes of combat? A few feeble voices are raised in unavailing protest, while the vast number are too lethargic to be stirred. The spirits of Nietzsche, Napoleon and Machiavelli have found lodging in the hearts of present rulers. Is not our nation

beginning to feel the infection?

I am not an alarmist, not jittery, not an “absolute pessimist”. I confess to being a “relative” or Christian pessimist. As such I believe it is my duty to feel a certain responsibility and a bit of concern for the situation, however futile that may be.

Suppose America declared war next Good Friday, what would you do? Suppose that, in your opinion, America had no greater cause for such action than she had two decades ago. What should be your attitude? Have we a common, Christian conscience in regard to whether a Christian should willingly shoulder a gun and go to kill or be killed? Should not the Church have a conviction, a “creed”, or at least a pronouncement, clear and unequivocal in the matter? Or shall we leave it with the individual’s conscience and let him carry the stigma with the conviction? Freedom of conscience is our inalienable right, but how many of our boys and young men have the courage of their conviction in the face of mass-opinion? The conscientious objector risks being considered a cheat and a coward. If it is in all sincerity a matter of conscience, it is hardly fair to put any one to such risks.

What counsel would the pastor give if one of his boys from the congregation came to him for moral and spiritual guidance in the matter? There are certainly many pastors and laymen, fathers and mothers, members of the Church, readers of the COMPANION, who are deeply concerned. Shall they have to deal with the problem individually at their own risk, or will they find support and backing a clear statement of the church?

Objections to such a pronouncement by the Lutheran Church might be raised on the score that it is inconsistent with the principles of separation of Church and State. I do not think such an objection would be valid. The sphere of the Church is not merely in matters of abstract faith, hope and love, but in the practical application of these principles to life. We grant that there are many problems and relationships, changing with the march of time, on which the Church cannot speak in every instance; but the problem before us is a perennial one, and the lines are rather well defined. In any case, separation of Church and State must not mean separation of faith and life; indeed, there can be no such separation. The ethical implications of Christianity are as insistent as they are difficult. He who would live Christ — be “in Christ” — and be an active part of society has no smooth sailing. His own little bark will often be in grave danger of being swallowed up by the waves. Should not then

the Church, the large steady ship, come to his rescue? The Church cannot adopt a laissez faire attitude. She is in the world to save, to serve, to help.

Is not NOW the time to discuss these problems? When war-hysteria seizes us, it is too late. We as a people have not been immunized against propaganda by our experience twenty years ago. And we are far less protected against exposure to an epidemic of propaganda than during the hectic days of the World War I. Then the medium of infection was newspapers, pictures, personal representatives of war departments, preachers who prostituted their pulpits in blind service to the spirit of hate. Now we have yet another medium, the radio. Imagine a radio censorship — not such a remote possibility as an “emergency measure” — and it would take uncommon sales resistance, clear thinking and firm conviction not to be swept into the turgid stream of mass-hysteria.

What chance has the individual to act in accordance with his conscience and the principles of Christ in such a setting? None, unless he has come to some pretty thoroughly thought-through conclusions before the flood breaks. And few will be strong enough, courageous enough, to remain true unless supported by the expressed convictions of others.

Where shall they find such support? Should not the Church offer such a support? Cannot the Church offer such a support? We know there was one such recognized church group which effectively supported conscientious objectors during the world war, the Quakers. Should not or cannot the Lutheran Church do as much? Should not or cannot all branches of the Christian Church come to some unanimous agreement and united expression on so vital a problem? Could not some world convention and Faith and Life or Faith and Order, such as the coming Edinburgh Conference in August 1937, make this problem a part of the business program?

It would seem that the Church should be profoundly concerned in a matter which so vitally affects her as an institution and her members as individuals. Peace treaties and pacts to outlaw wars have proved only breathing spells to give hatred a second wind. Committees on social problems might well put this one well at the head of the list of questions which demand early consideration.

We have raised many more questions than we would attempt to answer. Admittedly, the writer has not arrived at a conclusion or a solution. The reader may ask a no less relevant question: “Would the cause of peace be furthered by such ‘negative’ methods? Would not a pacifist stand by the Church merely serve to embarrass the government, without furthering the cause of peace?” We think it would further the cause of peace, taking a long view. It probably would not stop the “next war”, for there are legions outside the influence of the Church. But we believe it would be a potent deterrent to ill-considered declarations of war.

(Note by Pastor Burton’s daughter, Miriam Olson: This manuscript expands on parts of an earlier article, “Christianity and War”, and was obviously written for publication. Several references to the COMPANION (The Lutheran Companion) would seem to indicate it was meant for use in that periodical. Whether it was ever published or not, the author does not indicate.)



Gotthard E. Burton

between the commanders of his own and the adjacent company of soldiers. He was gassed during the last months of the war. He became an American citizen in 1921, at which time he was talked into changing his last name to a "pronounceable" one. He graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College at age 32, in 1923, and from Augustana Seminary, Rock Island, IL, in 1927. He was ordained on call to First Lutheran Church, Geneseo, IL, where he served until 1952. He also served Gethsemane in Brockton, MA, and Stockholm Lutheran Church in Cokato, MN. He was a man of many interests and an outspoken advocate on many issues, especially the education of the young. He is remembered with love by his many confirmands. He died in Litchfield, MN, April 02, 1983.

Editorial Note: Pastor and Mrs. Burton had two daughters. Miriam is married to George Olson. They were missionaries in Japan for forty years and live in Claremont, CA. Elsa is married to George Orescan. They live in Wilmington, DE. Elsa is secretary of the AHA Board of Directors. AHA

Sven Gotthard Eugene Bjurstrom was born on October 4, 1890, on a farm in Jämtland, Sweden, emigrated to the United States in 1915, worked on farms in North Dakota and pursued his high school education in Fergus Falls, MN. He was inducted into the US Army in early 1918. He went over the top in the battle of Saint Mihiel, dodging bullets as a runner carrying messages

Our Heritage: The Story of Our Family

by Miriam Olson and Elsa Orescan

Writing our family's story was a work of love primarily for our children and grandchildren. Elsa had been working on genealogy for years. We both had a storehouse of memories of events, stories our parents had told, pictures and documents that we had long talked of gathering together in a short book. The impetus to begin came from the discovery by my son, Tim, of a box full of materials from the Burton family stored in his father-in-law's garage. It was a treasure that included documents, sermons and thoughts of Gotthard Burton and even a talk our mother gave on being a pastor's wife.

The first half of the book is divided into four sections. The first begins in Jämtland, Sweden with the Björström family and brings our father up to his meeting with Miriam Rast. The second section focuses on the Rast family in Minnesota until that important meeting with Dad in Grand Marais. The third of

course, is our parent's life together. We end the first part of the book with some of our reminiscences of life in the Burton home and brief histories of our own families. The last half of "Our Heritage" is a collection of the writings of Gotthard and Miriam Burton.

My realization that the book might be interesting to others came from the remarks of a resident of our retirement community. She's not a Lutheran, but she grew up surrounded by Swedish relatives on her mother's side and other Augustana Lutherans in Minnesota. The book evoked in her fond memories and nostalgic feelings for the customs and the piety of those people.

"Our Heritage" is an 8 1/2 x 11 spiral bound booklet of 100 pages. If you would like a copy for \$10, including shipping and handling, contact Miriam Olson by snail-mail at 755 N Cambridge Way, Claremont, CA 91711 or by e-mail at georgemiriamolson@verizon.net. **AHA**