

DR. LUDWIG von CERDTELL

1872 - 1954

Founder of the

EUROPEAN EVANGELISTIC SOCIETY

by

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DR. LUDWIG VON CERDTTELL

Ludwig von Gerdteill was born on February 4, 1872. The "von" preceding his surname indicates that he was of noble rank. Von Gerdteill's father and grandfather had each served as commander of the Potsdam Guard. This was an elite corps of military responsible for the security of Potsdam (the Emperor's palace and grounds).

Ludwig was slated to succeed his father as commander. If he demonstrated capacity for the position. However, his privilege was forfeited when he rejected a military career and chose to enter the church. After studying theology under several different professors in Germany he passed his church-state examination, receiving an equivalent of a Master of Divinity degree. He was probably not ordained because he continued his study of theology and took the licentiate. The licentiate was a doctorate awarded by the university.

Through his studies he became astonished when he realized that what the New Testament taught was considered quite irrelevant to the profession of the ministry, church administration, forms, creeds, and constitution. In short, theology and church life were one thing and the message of the New Testament was something entirely different.

Pondering the problem, von Gerdteill raised the question, that if the New Testament was what the creeds affirmed it to be and if the message of the New Testament was the Word of God, why then should it not be relevant to the church? If this is so, how does one escape the necessity of voluntary baptism, how can the act of baptism be altered? He maintained that if the New Testament defines baptism as immersion the act cannot be altered and still be called baptism. Next he asserted that if baptism carried with it the beginnings of the Christian life and one conforms to

it, how can one escape the obligation of accepting seriously the New Testament in its entirety.

Dr. von Gerdtehl was married to Marie Rentsch on January 31, 1902. His wife was the niece of von Harnack and possibly related to Professor Loofs. These men were friends and professors of von Gerdtehl's. Hence, having arrived at the conviction that he must be baptized, he sought their counsel. Both men told him that the action of baptism made no difference whatsoever. Harnack said that he didn't care what von Gerdtehl believed so long that he didn't put it into practice. Harnack was Prediger at the Dom, the preacher of the Dom which was the Kaiser's church in Berlin. He was the Kaiser's official chaplain and he wanted von Gerdtehl to remain in the church so that he could make him his successor at the Dom.

Refusing this offer, von Gerdtehl had to make a further decision as to whether he dared to accept the complete disinheritance and disavowal of most of his associations in order to become baptized. This meant that he would have to (1) completely renounce any claim to succession as commander of the Potsdam Guard, (2) forfeit the possibility of a theological position in the university, (3) renounce his claim to any inheritance of his family, and (4) be obligated to surrender all honors, status and claim to such as would be his as a noble. (In Germany at this time nobility had great privileges, including large tax exemptions and immunity to arrest except under warrant from very high officials.)

Dr. von Gerdtehl also had to face probable indictment for heresy, the penalty being death. In Germany at this time it was illegal for a nobleman to be baptized. Peasants were permitted to be baptized, but for a nobleman to renounce his rank and obligations to the state and accept a peasant practice was tantamount to treason. In Germany the gospel was conceived as applying to everyone, but only as it was administered by the official state church. Since full legal rights were accorded only to the state church, with provision

being made for limited privileges of sects, a patriotic citizen almost had to be a member. If a citizen practiced a religion contrary to the official church he was suspect of being aligned with the enemies of the state.

Dr. von Gerdtehl was baptized sometime after his marriage in 1902, but was never indicted for heresy the reason was never made known. He did have the distinction of being the first nobleman to be baptized in Germany during the entire existence of the German empire.

After his baptism he found it increasingly difficult to remain silent about his convictions, so he began to write pamphlets and lecture to university students. During this period from 1901-1913 he lived off the income of his property, the money he received from lecturing, and the support that his friends and family secretly provided. At his time he also received help from the Christadelphians. He identified himself with this group and worshiped with them because they were the closest to his own convictions; however, he was never formally a member. They were sympathetic with each other, but he didn't join with them because of disagreement on certain points of theology, faith, or practice in which he felt them to be defective in their understanding of the New Testament.

When he first began lecturing in 1901 the groups were relatively small, but after several years he was attracting crowds of from one to three thousand students. The evangelical program he carried on was interrupted by World War I. Because he was not permitted to enlist in the German army, he served as a nurse from 1914-17. This is indicative of the man's great compassion and humility when, with all the bearing and potential of a great military leader, he ministered to the needs of the wounded.

After the war his crowds were larger than ever. He was encouraged because he was convinced that if reform was ever to come it must be started among and supported by

the intellectuals and students. To clarify his position he published many works, one was a book entitled A History of Baptism. This book, along with most of his other writings, was later burned by Hitler's forces.

During the period when von Gerdtehl was lecturing on university campuses throughout Germany trying to gain support, Hitler was also organizing his movement. Dr. von Gerdtehl said that on three different occasions he met Hitler on the same platform for debate and that the power of his argument drove Hitler off each time. In these confrontations substantive issues were debated: Is the Bible to be taken seriously in the culture, procedures and government of the state, or is the state founded on something else?

It was held by many that the old German state was founded by the edict of God and that He equally established the church and state. Hitler maintained that the state was established by God who is to be identified with the ancient German Thor. The state was created by God but the Bible portrayed a religion perverted by the Jews. Hitler proclaimed, "Gott, Volk, Blut;" God, people, blood. One has to have the Teutonic blood to be part of the people.

Dr. von Gerdtehl differed from both positions. He held that the people who received the Word of God, as it is related in the New Testament, are commissioned by that Word to participate in government in the interest of human welfare. This meant that Christians should participate in the government with a view toward the development of a better society.

Hitler and von Gerdtehl were both dissatisfied with the Weimar Republic but they were in disagreement as to how to bring about change. Dr. von Gerdtehl thought all Christians should take an interest in the government and participate in it to bring about the reform. Hitler wanted to crush the Weimar Republic, remove all Christians and purify the old Teutonic religion of all Jewish perversion.

Dr. von Gerdtehl probably made his first trip to the U.S. in 1929 because of curiosity in the Disciples, which was stimulated by the book, The Disciples an Interpretation, by B.A. Abbott. When he arrived in the U.S., Abbott introduced him to many leaders in the Restoration movement: Peter Almslee, S.S. Lappin, G.G. Hoover, C.G. Kindred, W.R. Walker, P.H. Welshimer, R.H. Miller, Claude Hill, Edwin Errett, W.F. Rotenburger, Harry Schaeffer, Will Erwin, W.H. Book, T.K. Smith and F.D. Kershner. These men arranged for him to speak at the 1930 World Convention in Washington. Before von Gerdtehl returned to Germany he formed the German Evangelistic Society in America.

When he got back to Germany in 1932, he discovered that Hitler had scored his victory and was proceeding to dispose of his enemies. Dr. von Gerdtehl was considered a political opponent of Hitler, so he was promptly put under surveillance. Realizing that his arrest was imminent, a friend working in the Post Office kept careful watch over the Gestapo mail. At this time all communications were directed through the Post Office, hence all orders for arrest came through one place.

Finally von Gerdtehl's friend (possibly a member of the Gestapo) informed him that the letter ordering his arrest had arrived. He immediately left his family and home, carrying only a small arm bag. He casually walked to the train station and booked third class passage to Switzerland. The Gestapo constantly checked the identification of people leaving the country and on this occasion searched first class passengers because they were especially interested in finding him. But it was never thought that a man of nobility would ride third class to Switzerland. Here he remained for several months, corresponding with his wife and family under the code name "Red Indian," before he traveled to the World Convention at Leicester, England, and finally on to the U.S.

In 1935 he came to Indianapolis, Indiana, where he taught in the School of Religion of Butler University

at the invitation of Dean F.D. Kershner. He entered retirement pension on January 1, 1943, died at the General Hospital in Indianapolis May 31, 1954 and was buried in the Crown Hill cemetery in Indianapolis. He was survived by two sons, of whom one was Siegfried, of Arnsberg, Germany, and his wife Marie, who died November 14, 1958 in Arnsberg.

There are tragic aspects in the life of Ludwig von Gerdtell. He closed his mortal life far from his homeland, under a death sentence by a government party which slaughtered millions of innocents. He never saw his wife and children again; he could not return to Germany and they were not permitted out.

On the other hand there was victory, not only in death, but also in his prior labors. Because of his commitment to Christ and his conviction of faith many have come to know the simple, saving Gospel of Christ. A generation of Christian ministers in the United States (plus many others in Europe) benefited from his teaching. The European Evangelistic Society and other Christian movements continue his efforts toward a more Christian Europe and an evangelistic endeavor whose target is the whole world.

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