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Louis Henry Ziemer: A Journey of Faith

Abstract

This article seeks to present the importance of studying lesser known leaders in American Evangelicalism by looking into the life, conversion, and ministry of Dr. Louis Henry Ziemer. Not only was his ministry as a Christian Missionary Alliance pastor extensive, but his life and conversion story highlight some of the most controversial and highly debated issues regarding salvation. Ziemer served as a pastor in the Lutheran church for many years, before he was placed on trial for heresy. As a result, Ziemer left the Lutheran church and joined the Christian Missionary Alliance. Through the examination of Ziemer's conversion and ministry both as a Lutheran and Christian Missionary Alliance pastor, it is clear to see that American Christian heritage is greatly impacted not only by well know religious leaders such as Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney, but also greatly shaped by lesser known men who faithfully carried on the ministry and faith.

Keywords

CMA, Christian Missionary Alliance, Conversion, Christianity

Introduction

American Evangelicalism has developed over hundreds of years with leadership and influences from spiritual giants such as Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, D.L. Moody, and many others. While many look to these great men recognized by history as the key leaders in the development of American Evangelicalism, if it were not for hundreds if not thousands of lesser known preachers, pastors, and lay Christians across America, implementing and continuing on the work of these great men, America's Christian heritage would be lost.

Each of these spiritual leaders emphasized the importance of a personal conversion experience in an Evangelical Christian's life. Throughout the story of American Christianity there is a strong thread of controversy regarding salvation based on works versus salvation based on faith alone. The story of Dr. Louis Henry Ziemer highlights many of the important themes in the history of American Evangelicalism. His conversion experience along with the controversy that followed within the Lutheran Church that he pastored emphasizes this longstanding controversy of Evangelical doctrine. Additionally, Ziemer's story of conversion and the trials that followed in his ministry as a Lutheran pastor provide a lens through which one can understand some of the wider discussions and debates going on within the Lutheran church during the early twentieth century. It is clear that as a result of his conversion, Ziemer's ministry became solely focused on evangelistic outreach and saving souls. In one newspaper article, he states, "I am not here to please the people but to save men from sin."¹ Ziemer's evangelical conversion experience ultimately led to his expulsion from the Lutheran church and the beginning of an impactful ministry within the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) at the Toledo Gospel Tabernacle. Through his ministry, Ziemer effectively carried forward the evangelical tradition established by the many spiritual leaders that preceded him.²

The Evangelical Conversion Narrative

It is essential for historians to recognize the importance of personal conversion narratives, but also examine them with a mindful and analytical eye. Historian D. Bruce Hindmarsh discusses five key concepts that need to be analyzed within personal conversion stories. These include autobiography, narrative, identity, conversion, and theology.³ Hindmarsh argues that evangelical conversion narratives are not only sources of historical analysis and reconstruction, but also "acts of self interpretation."⁴ In examining Ziemer's story, historians can see some of the

¹Ruth Ziemer, "Statement by Rev. Ziemer: Says He Is Here Not to Please People but to Save Men," in *Rev. L. H. Ziemer: A Biography*(Toledo, Ohio: Ziemer Ziemer Company).

² It is important to acknowledge that most of the information contained within this paper comes directly from Ziemer's own autobiographical account along with his daughter's account of his life. Historians must examine these sources in light of the fact that they may be trying to portray the events of Ziemer's life favorably towards him. However, within Ruth Ziemer's biography, she included newspaper clippings of articles that covered the events of Ziemer's heresy trial, which helps to provide a balanced account of Ziemer's life. Additionally, as Ziemer's great-great grand daughter, it is important that I take special precaution to understand the full context of his story and avoid personal biases within my own writing

³ D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

controversies taking place within the wider Lutheran church. Additionally, it is clear that Ziemer defines and then redefines himself throughout his story. Before his conversion, Ziemer rooted his identity in the fact that he was a Lutheran pastor, however, after his conversion, his identity was firmly rooted in his salvation found in Jesus Christ. He often mentions his own wretched sinful ways and the amazing grace that Christ showed to him in his redemption. Not only within his autobiography, but also his daughter's biography which drew heavily on his own autobiography, there is a sense of wholeness or completeness to his story. On a wider scale, Evangelical narratives point to "the great desideratum of human life" as the "recovery of right relationship with God." Throughout Ziemer's story, he depicts not only how he was recovered into a right relationship with God, but also uses his experience to encourage those reading his account to allow God to do the same thing in their own lives. Ultimately, it is clear that Ziemer's conversion narrative falls neatly into Hindmarsh's analysis in that throughout his whole story he is "preoccupied with the moral law, both as something that prepares a person for conversion and as something that guides a believer afterwards."⁵ Additionally Hindmarsh looks at personal conversion narratives as a search for identity and believes that conversion is a central part of how the question "Who am I?" is answered.⁶ It is clear through not only Ziemer's conversion narrative, but also through many of his sermons, pamphlets, and journal articles that his identity is rooted ultimately in the gospel that saved him.

Ziemer the Lutheran Pastor

In terms of analyzing Ziemer's conversion story as a narrative, there is a very clear beginning, middle, and end. Ziemer begins his narrative with his childhood and upbringing, then details his time as an unknowingly unconverted Lutheran Pastor, and finally depicts his conversion experience and the ministry and issues that followed. In the story of his conversion, Ziemer recalls that some of the earliest recollections from his childhood were religious in nature. He grew up in a family that had been Lutheran "for many generations back."⁷ Because of this heritage, his religious upbringing was highly orthodox. He described himself as "indoctrinated in all the principles of Lutheranism."⁸ The Ziemer family immigrated to the United States from the German province of Pomerania in the early 1800s to flee from state controlled religion. These devout immigrants passed down their highly religious and traditional belief system to their children. As a result, Ziemer was caught up in the religiosity of the Lutheran church and ultimately describes his early life as living in "uncertainty of salvation and in the fear of death and judgment."⁹

This uncertainty continued as Ziemer studied to become a Lutheran pastor. At the age of seventeen he went to Martin Luther Theological College and Seminary in Buffalo, New York, where he spent six years studying theology.¹⁰ One local newspaper in his hometown documents his return to school in New York on September 11, 1902.¹¹ In December 1906, Ziemer was ordained in Holy Trinity Church in Buffalo, New York, where he entered ministry within the

⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁷ L. H. Ziemer, "The Story of My Conversion and Relative Experiences," (Toledo, OH: The Toledo Gospel Tabernacle, 1926), 5.

⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *The Austin Daily Herald*, September 11, 1902.

Lutheran Church. He first pastored churches in Elkton and Grand Meadow, Minnesota. Looking back at his ministry in Minnesota, Ziemer states, “As a preacher I was quite successful, as the saying goes. But I was still unsaved. And how can a man give to others what he does not possess himself?” One local newspaper reports “Rev. Louis Ziemer preached...on Sunday evening and in spite of the rainy weather a good crowd greeted him and enjoyed a splendid sermon.”¹² Before his conversion, Ziemer was successful in terms of church attendance, however he was ineffective in sharing the gospel that would radically transform his life.

Within the norm of Evangelical Christianity, there comes a point where a person must make a personal decision and go through a conversion experience. Many of the spiritual giants and foremost leaders within Evangelical Christian history emphasized the importance of such a conversion experience in which a person chooses to surrender to Jesus Christ and accept his forgiveness. In looking back on his life, in the early years after his ministry within the Lutheran church began, Ziemer makes the observation that though he did intellectually believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ, his “belief had never been quickened, nor energized in his soul by the Holy Spirit.”¹³ Ziemer concluded that the truths of the gospel had never “penetrated into [his] heart” and ultimately he had never been born again.

One day while in his study preparing for a sermon entitled “The Lutheran Church God’s Saving Vessel” a friend came to visit Ziemer. The man looked Ziemer in the eyes and asked him “Have you ever been saved, and do you know it?” Ziemer notes, “This question went to the very quick of my heart like a sharp two-edged sword.”¹⁴ Ziemer wrestled with this question for many days before he realized that according to the truth he was preaching, he had never surrendered his life to Christ. Within this same timeframe, another man gave Ziemer a subscription to the publication *The Alliance Weekly*, a Christian Missionary Alliance journal, for which later Ziemer himself would become a regularly published writer. Within this publication, Ziemer notes that, “writers declared from time to time that every believer might know that he is saved; and to prove their statements, they quoted the Word of God very freely.”¹⁵

It was a result of these two interactions that Ziemer began to pray “for light and spiritual understanding” and truth.¹⁶ Ziemer states that the Holy Spirit revealed to him “that the work of Jesus Christ upon the cross is a perfect and complete work for our salvation...[and] convinced [him] in a new way that this salvation was for sinners like [him].”¹⁷ He came to the conclusion that self-righteousness and reliance on works “have no place in God’s program and plan of salvation.”¹⁸ Ziemer noted that, “God cannot save us and give us eternal life until we stop working for salvation and justifying ourselves. But just as soon as we are ready and willing to accept salvation as His own free gift of love to believing sinners, He justifies and freely forgives us of all our sins.”¹⁹ This one moment of conversion changed Ziemer’s life and ministry forever. Ziemer states in his auto-biography that he wrote out the following as “a complete surrender of [himself]” to God:

I call heaven and earth to witness this 17th day of June, 1915, that I now and forever give myself away, body, soul, and spirit, together

¹² “Waltham,” *The Austin Daily Herald*, June 22, 1909.

¹³ Ruth Ziemer, “Rev. L. H. Ziemer: A Biography,” (Toledo, Ohio: Ziemer Ziemer Company), 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶ Ziemer, 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

with all I am or ever can hope to be, to God my Father, who has created me for His own glory, and to Jesus Christ my Lord, who saved me by His Blood, and to the everlasting control of the blessed Holy Spirit, my Sanctifier and Comforter, to love and to serve Him in sunshine or rain, in loss or gain, in joy or in sorrow, in life or in death. Amen and Amen.²⁰

As related to Hindmarsh's analysis of the personal conversion narrative, Ziemer's conversion marked an important point in which he defined his identity as a born again believer. This identity shaped his entire outlook on life. From this point on his ministry focused on sharing the gospel that transformed his life.

The Lutheran Church

Lutheran immigrants coming to the United States from Europe, particularly Germany, fled from a largely state controlled church. In the United States, they were able to find opportunity to shape and control the establishment of the Lutheran church organizationally.²¹ The Lutheran churches in America took shape under a synodical type of organization whereby "congregations within a certain territory would send representatives to a meeting to settle their mutual problems and plan common objectives."²² The congregation of the church was the supreme acting body and had the right to elect all church officials and ministers by a majority vote.²³ Within the church there are elders, trustees, and deacons. The church council holds most authority outside of the annual congregational meetings, however on matters of calling a pastor or major property repairs, the congregation is normally called to make a decision. *The Common Service Book of the Lutheran Church* states that the councilmen are to ensure that "the pure Word of God be preached as the Church confesses it and only by those duly authorized according to the Constitution of the Congregation."²⁴

Above the Lutheran congregation, stands the Church Synod, leaders from a group of churches that come together to not only seek out answers to church problems, but also to support one another in ministry. The original intentions of an annual synodical gathering was to provide an "opportunity for ministers to tell one another their troubles, to partake of the Lord's Supper together, to edify one another with accounts concerning the progress of the kingdom of God, and to afford mutual encouragement under difficult official burdens."²⁵ Each district synod has its own constitution and is made up of elected officers, committees, and boards.²⁶ The synods have the power to discipline their pastors and congregations if pastors are preaching or teaching false doctrine according to the Lutheran Church.

Historian John Brug notes that the Lutheran church, like many other churches at the turn of the century, were assaulted with modernism and secularism that the industrial age brought.

²⁰ Ibid., 24.

²¹ Altman K Swihart, *Luther and the Lutheran Church, 1483-1960* (New York Philosophical Library, 1960), 439.

²² Ibid., 439.

²³ Ibid., 440.

²⁴ Ibid., 97; *Common Service Book of the Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society 1917).

²⁵ Swihart, 445.

²⁶ Ibid., 445.

Not only did evolutionary beliefs but also “negative criticism...undermine the vitality of Lutheranism in the early twentieth century.”²⁷ In the 1880s there was controversy within the Lutheran church regarding beliefs on the doctrine of election or predestination. The Ohio synod believed that humans “cannot by [their] own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ as [their] Lord, nor Come to Him, but that the Holy Ghost has called [them] by the Gospel.”²⁸ Other issues in the early twentieth century arose causing fracture among Joint Missouri-Ohio Synod. Some of these issues include “pulpit and altar fellowship, lodges, conversion and election, millennialism, and open questions.” Brug notes that within the early decades of the twentieth century, the Lutheran church, while on paper professed loyalty to the confessions of faith, they had abandoned these doctrines including the idea that justification comes through faith alone – a core Lutheran doctrine around which the entire Reformation was built.²⁹ This organizational and doctrinal framework provides context and understanding in the next part of Ziemer’s story.

Ziemer the Converted Pastor

The middle of Ziemer’s story is marked by controversy over his newly discovered evangelical teaching. The official board of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, in Mansfield, Ohio, called him to be their pastor on February 22, 1914. On March 3, a local newspaper reported Ziemer’s acceptance.³⁰ As a result of his new found faith and freedom in Christ, Ziemer believed his ministry was greatly expanded. He described the church that called him as a “strict, orthodox church, holding to all the ritualism of Lutheranism.”³¹ After only a few months of preaching, there was “an old-fashioned Pentecostal revival” in that church out of “necessity from the human side.”³² Altar calls and public invitations to accept Christ were not allowed in their public services, however Ziemer did not want to stop the work of the Lord. As revival broke out within the congregation, opposition quickly arose to Ziemer’s preaching. Controversy ensued after Ziemer tried to lead a prominent member of the church to salvation in Christ on his deathbed. Ziemer states, “For this kindness, I gained the disfavor and enmity of his family and household.”³³ Two months after this incident, the Church Board called for his resignation for charges of heresy and false teaching. The Church was outraged with Ziemer. One newspaper article stated that he wanted to “coerce he congregation to swallow his self-made and self-righteous theology...What right has he to question our Christianity only because we do not accept his unbiblical and un-Lutheran views.”³⁴ The formal charges of heresy brought against Ziemer include the following:

1. He believes and teaches un-Biblical and un-Lutheran doctrines concerning holy baptisms, denying that baptism is the means of regeneration.

²⁷ John Brug, "Doctrinal Challenges Facing Lutheranism in the 21st Century," (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary).

²⁸ John Lang, "A Short History of the Lutheran Church in Ohio," (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1969), 5.

²⁹ Brug.

³⁰ *The Lima News*, March 3, 1914.

³¹ Ziemer, 26.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁴ Ziemer, 27.

2. He has departed from the Lutheran faith and is guilty of heresy in teaching the un-Biblical and un-Lutheran doctrine of the second coming of Christ.
3. He is guilty of heresy because he sets aside some of the ordinances, usages and customs of our Church, which are near and dear to our people, and in their stead he has introduced others which are a grievous offense, and against the faith and spirit of our church.
4. He is guilty also of heresy for teaching un-Biblical and un-Lutheran doctrine about sanctification, preaching, teaching and proclaiming that he is a perfectly sanctified man.
5. He is guilty of heresy because he fellowships with false believers, and unites in religious worship with non-Lutherans.³⁵

Ziemer adamantly opposed these charges publically in the church and in the secular local press that was covering the schism that took place within St. Paul's Lutheran Church. Within his lengthy "Sermon of Self-Defense" preached on June 11, 1916, Ziemer clearly defended himself against the charges from his own congregation using not only Scripture to back up his beliefs, but also key doctrinal beliefs cited from the Lutheran Augsburg Confession.³⁶

On May 31, 1916, the president of the District Synod of Ohio along with three other ministers came to Mansfield, Ohio, to examine the charges brought against Ziemer. Ultimately, after hearing testimonies from witnesses the committee cited Ziemer to go before the annual Synodical Ministerium meeting in Lima, Ohio, from June 23-26 to stand trial for the charges of heresy. After appearing before the Ministerium and hearing the witnesses of opposition, the committee acquitted Ziemer for every doctrinal charge of heresy.³⁷ Nevertheless, the church council of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church was still dissatisfied with their pastor's leadership and called for his resignation on September 25, 1916. In this letter, the church council demanded that he and his family immediately move out of the parsonage and resign from his position of pastor of the church. This came as quite a blow to him and his family, as they were left not only jobless but also homeless.³⁸ Ziemer's strong faith, however, was not shaken in the midst of this trial, it was his faith that sustained him as he sought his next move.

The Christian Missionary Alliance

The end of Ziemer's story demonstrates his influence and ministry within the Christian and Missionary Alliance as well as the larger Christian community. Following Ziemer's resignation, he began doing street ministry within Mansfield, Ohio, where he "preached the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ to an ever increasing congregation."³⁹ This growing congregation eventually built the Grace Gospel Tabernacle, and it was dedicated in 1920. Ziemer pastored this congregation for nine years before moving to Toledo, Ohio in 1925. There he pastored a large Christian Missionary Alliance Church, called the Toledo Gospel Tabernacle. Ziemer said of this church in his autobiography, "Here God, in his abundant mercy and His unfailing grace, sees fit

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ L.H. Ziemer, "Sermon of Self-Defense," (Mansfield, Ohio: St. Paul's Lutheran Church, 1916).

³⁷ Ziemer, 31.

³⁸ Ibid., 34.

³⁹ Ibid., 36.

to use me in His service of salvation and preaching of the Gospel with blessed and eternal results. The glory shall be His and His alone for all eternity.”⁴⁰

Ziemer served at the Toledo Gospel Tabernacle for many years and established an effective ministry and widespread influence. Not only did his church grow exponentially over the nearly thirty years he pastored, he also began a radio broadcast in May of 1930 that continued on beyond his pastorate. His obituary concludes, “his circle of friends in both his tabernacle and radio congregation has numbered into the tens of thousands.”⁴¹ As he continued to pastor this church, he became more involved with the Christian and Missionary Alliance as an organization. Ziemer was a member of the Board of Managers beginning in 1941 alongside noted Christian author and pastor, A.W. Tozer and Christian businessman R. G. LeTourneau. Additionally, Ziemer became a regularly published writer in the Christian and Missionary Alliance’s journal, *The Alliance Weekly*. In June of the following year, Dr. Bob Jones of Bob Jones College in Cleveland, Tennessee presented an honorary Doctorate of Divinity to this “distinguished pastor” who called attention “to the importance of Christian leadership.”⁴² It is clear that Ziemer was a widely recognized leader that held a position of influence within the CMA and Christian community as a result of his faithful, life-changing commitment to the gospel.

In addition to his service to the Christian and Missionary Alliance, his devotion to the gospel in his own life and testimony spurred his support for missionaries and the spread of the gospel internationally. Not only was his church heavily involved in missions and funding missions, his own children became missionaries in Siam, the Philippines, and Vietnam.⁴³ His obituary reads “Dr. Ziemer made a very valuable contribution to the work of Christ through The Christian and Missionary Alliance...His missionary interest was very real, not only as evidenced by the large contributions of his church but also the lives and ministry of his own children.”⁴⁴

While Louis Henry Ziemer is not a well-known or much-studied figure in the study of American Christian Heritage, his story, like those of other little known pastors, provides a look into an ordinary man’s journey of faith and widespread ministry in the same vein as the spiritual giants many often look to in the history of American Christianity. Ziemer’s crisis of faith and ultimate conversion spurred a radical shift in his ministry and work as a pastor. In studying his conversion story, it is important to note that his identity became rooted in the gospel that radically transformed his life, which then propelled him into a life of service and devotion to God. In his statement following conversion, he surrenders “to love and to serve Him in sunshine or rain, in loss or in gain, in joy or in sorrow, in life or in death.”⁴⁵ Upon making that commitment, Ziemer did not know the journey before him. He had no idea that he would be put on trial for heresy and dismissed within the church of his youth. He did not know that he and his family would be homeless for a period, nor did he know the incredible ministry and impact he would have as a Christian and Missionary Alliance pastor. It is clear that through Ziemer’s life and ministry, he remained true to the commitment he made on June 17, 1915. It was his the national and international reach that Louis Henry Ziemer had that illustrates the importance of studying otherwise unknown subjects in American religious history. His story is one of denominational and doctrinal development, dynamic personal transition, spiritual hope, and

⁴⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁴¹ H. M. Shuman, "Louis Henry Ziemer," *The Alliance Weekly*, November 4, 1953, 11.

⁴² "Rev. L.H. Ziemer Honored," *The Alliance Weekly* June 20, 1942, 396.

⁴³ Shuman, 10-11.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ziemer, 24.

service to mankind –all vital pieces needed for a deeper understanding of Christianity’s role in American heritage.

Appendix



Rev. L.H. Ziemer



Dr. and Mrs. L.H. Ziemer

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