

Die heilsgeschichtliche Theologie Erich Sauers

Horst Afflerbach

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F.F. Bruce called him probably the ablest theologian and Bible-teacher of all Brethren circles on the continent, Billy Graham loved his books, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones found them ‘absolutely first-class in every way’ (p.19). Yet the life and theology of Erich Sauer (1898–1959), whose theological works sold about one million copies in twenty languages and who shaped Wiedenest Bible College, the training school of the German Open Brethren, for almost forty years, has received almost no academic treatment. Horst Afflerbach, himself a long-term theological lecturer and designated as the next principal at Wiedenest, has, therefore, chosen Sauer’s theology, with its two ‘focal points’, salvation history and missions (p.17), as the topic of his doctoral thesis. His assiduous analysis of Sauer’s books and articles, personal letters and other archival sources has paid off: his book on Sauer is an insightful, well-documented (eighty pages of bibliography!), and very readable portrayal of one of the significant Brethren theologians of the twentieth century.

Afflerbach carries out two different projects, which are reflected in the two-fold structure of the book: First, he writes what he calls a ‘theological biography in chronological order’ (p.21), describing Sauer’s life and work from his upbringing, teenage conversion and academic education at Berlin until his death at Wiedenest in 1959 (pp.23-170). Handicapped by severe problems with his eyesight, Sauer came to Wiedenest in 1920, where he became a theological teacher, author, international speaker, local church elder and leader within the Open Brethren Movement. The year 1937 brought the publication of his two magna opera, *The Dawn of World Redemption: A Survey of Historical Revelation in the Old Testament* and *The Triumph of the Crucified* (English translation 1951 by G.H. Lang), two original works which outlined Sauer’s christocentric conception of salvation history. In 1937, too, the *Bund freikirchlicher Christen*

was formed as a unified ecclesiastical body of the two German Brethren circles, and the death of Johannes Warns forced Sauer to assume the position of academic dean at Wiedenest. Afflerbach outlines the individual contributions of his various publications, the split within the Brethren Movement after World War II, which Sauer was unable to prevent, and the inspiring project of the last years of his life: the formation of the Wiedenest mission centre since 1952, which was based on Sauer's missiology of the 'sending local church', and carried out by his colleague and later successor, Ernst Schrupp. 'Every priest of God—a witness!/Every redeemed person—a missionary!/Every local church—a fellowship for witness and missions,' was his motto (p.161 [my translation]). Afflerbach also writes in detail about a substantial stain in Sauer's biography: although he never was a Nazi and some Nazi periodicals even ridiculed his Israel-centred eschatology, Sauer saw in Hitler's rise to power a gracious gift of providence, disbelieved and rejected as 'horror propaganda' circulating rumours about Nazi atrocities as late as 1939, and, like many Brethren leaders in Germany, remained loyal to the authorities of the Third Reich as the divinely instituted government. This attitude had been furthered by his openness to pseudo-scientific ideas about a hierarchy of human races and to the fear of Jewish dominance—ideas which he incorporated in his otherwise biblical salvation-historical scheme. Sauer later regretted his wrong assessment, but hardly ever talked about it and never made a public apology. Although Afflerbach might have explored a little further what function (if any) his 'racial scheme of salvation history' had within his overall theology of history, his historical treatment of this puzzling inconsistency within Sauer's fervently Christian biography is adequate and balanced.

In the second main part of his book, Afflerbach analyses Sauer's theology of salvation history and missions (pp.171-376). Convinced of the historical reliability and 'organic' unity of the biblical documents, and with frequent reference to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century 'salvation historians', Bengel, Beck, von Hofmann, and Auberlen, Sauer aimed to write the history of divine

revelation. History, for him, was divine revelation (p.184), since world history offered the building blocks of salvation history, and salvation history, in turn, was 'theology of world history' (p.188f). Although Sauer was interested in numerous scientific fields and influenced by several schools of thought, e.g. covenant theology, scientific apologetics (in the tradition of Bettex and Karl Heim), and revivalist theology, he remained a representative of (Open) Brethren theology, both in his ecclesiology, and in his premillennarian and (largely, though not fully) dispensational eschatology. Sauer's illustrated *Heilsplan* (salvation map) became internationally known. He saw history as a progressive line, leading to the heavenly glory, which, nevertheless, had one focal point: the redemptive work of Christ (p.205). Unlike other theorists of salvation history, he saw God's objective deeds in history and man's subjective experience of faith as two sides of the same coin (p.207). Thus, he was able to hold his global historical vision and the 'experiential proof' for God's existence to the individual (p.281), his theoretical studies and his devotional writings (*In the Arena of Faith: A Call to a Consecrated Life* (1952, English trans 1955)) in balance. Sauer rejected the doctrine of universal salvation of all men as unscriptural but seems to have been more open to it in private communication (p.323). He had a lofty view of the church as the central agent of salvation history and carrier of missions, and implemented this vision in his pioneering missionary work at Wiedenest.

With much erudition, Afflerbach places Sauer's theological system within its intellectual context and also shows its position with regard to mid-twentieth century academic theology developed by scholars like Barth, Bultmann and Cullmann (who was much closer to him). Due to his pastoral and evangelistic interests, his categorical rejection of historical criticism within Biblical studies, and the existentialist leanings of contemporary academic theology, however, Sauer remained largely outside the academic community of his day. Afflerbach ends his book with the chapter 'Critical Acclaim and Prospects' (pp.377-409), in which he points out areas in which he finds Sauer still relevant for current church life and theology, a comprehensive bibliography (pp.410-489), and an appendix with

various biographical documents and a four-fold index (pp.490-543). Anyone interested in salvation-historical theology in twentieth century evangelicalism or in the history of the Open Brethren in Germany who is not put off by reading German, is highly recommended to read this instructive (and moderately priced) book.

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