

"GUS" REHNSTROM/AL AHLSTROM CORRESPONDENCE 1953 - 1968 from a file of 75 letters, beginning when Al was freshman and friend **Otto Jacobson** was senior at Upsala College. "Gus" often extends greetings to Otto and another freshman student, **David Carlson**, whom "Gus" confirmed while serving in Norwood, Mass.

*After seeing the Martin Luther film:* "Undoubtedly one of the greatest pictures of our age. . . The scenes in which Luther discovers Rom. 1:17 are powerful. . . From the point of view of a dramatic presentation, a picture could not be factual. The actors are superior. . . I should be very happy to see it several times." 10/24/1953

*Reports going to house-blessing (after he led communion at the Worcester Home for Aged) for the **Eskil Englund** family (president of NEConference) - a new home after former home was destroyed in previous June's tornado. (2/22/1954)*

*He resigned from Immanuel, Gardner, to return to Pennsylvania at DuBois in winter of 1954. He soon writes to commend Otto and Al who will be leading worship in Gardner over Easter holiday. That first letter from DuBois:* "The whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick. . . " When you think of the situation, especially the Pharisees, one cannot help thinking about the pure humor Christ expressed when he said this. The pharisees, sickest of all, were "whole," righteous. This is a kind of divine humoresque. My sermon will be worked around divine mercy. I really never knew that the NT is so replete with novelties and I wish I could see one every day. (4/14/1954)

*Reacting to current news from Evanston (Assembly of the World Council of Churches):* Amidst the problems of secularization and social change the church has the constant temptation simply to drift along with events. In order to find help in resisting this temptation we must take strong hold upon our Christian beliefs. . . . I feel that the relation of the church to the world is a special revelation. It's not what philosophy says. If it were, I would just as soon agree with George Santayana who spoke of religions as fables. The only Christian relevance is Christ, God incarnate, and his followers in the world. On this Church unity must be built. I admit, however, that the interpretation is generally something different from this. Numerous examples could be given. Not so very long ago a pastor in the church made clear that he was primarily interested in plush seats, pleasant lights and a departure from present forms - and also recordings of the Psalms of David by actors. Last week I had the privilege to proclaim the Gospel in the morning devotions over the radio station here (WCED). I spoke of the following subjects: "The Rock Foundation," "A Spiritual Vision," "The Spirit of living faith" and "The Power of Christ Unavoidable." (8/18/1954)

*Still responding to reports from WCC in Evanston:* Last evening I was asked whether the WCC is in the direction of this unity (referring to a quotation from Aulen's **Christus Victor**). I answered that I find the church groups (*within the WCC*) represented expressing different views. Some as we know view it as "a way of life" in which Jesus is an example - or pattern. This view I feel is not Christianity as I find St. Paul, for example interpreting Christianity. It seems I have heard so many sermons proclaiming Jesus as our great exemplar or else as a social genius and a great personality. The true or Christian view according to St. John, St. Paul etc. is that Christ is God who came down to save the world . . . the Redeemer of lost and condemned creatures, cf. Luther's explanation of the Second Article (8/26/1954)

Yesterday I spent a few hours reading "The Degree of Knowledge" by Jacques Maritain (1938). . . Right now I classify Maritain as a "caritas" philosopher. He comes through the line of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. What he calls the spirit above speculative theology is not scriptural (NT in particular). (9/24/1954) [*"Caritas" is a synthesis of Agape-love and Hellenistic Eros-love, criticized by Nygren.*]

*I asked about news of a re-building of Harvard's Divinity School by N. Pusey, so he commented:* I don't think that men like (George) Buttrick (who wonders "if God there be,") can be an agent for any change toward real Christianity, and Christian enthusiasm. I don't recall that he ever pinpointed any central confession or dogma. Stendahl (*who just arrived at Harvard*) I don't know. I hope, however, that he is the very opposite of Hammarskjold. We need in all the Christian ministries courageous, creative, impressionable leaders. Tillich has not divine grace for the Christian synthesis - incarnation. He stops at ethics - Christian without Christ as Lord and Savior - at Harvard I had many wonderful or valuable experiences, but I cannot help saying that there I also realized a fierce attack on the deity of Christ. Toynbee considers all religions natural. To him the power of Christ is not different from the power in another great man. To him the 2<sup>nd</sup> article would be a theological puzzle. But rebirth would change his view. (10/22/54)

[*He's responding to my report of going to churches in Manhattan with friends*] I'm interested in your appraisal of sermons you heard. The best I can say for George Buttrick is that he is a struggling soul. I feel that he is wondering a great deal. He seems to move in a mysticism in which one weeps for Christ and that he seems to strain to follow Him as an example only. (11/3/54)

Sometimes or almost all the time, we who tremble the delivery of a sermon set the standard of this delivery quite high. We also require of ourselves sufficient divine grace to be a pure instrument through which the message flows out to the people. Only divine grace which a true believer receives can deliver a Christian sermon. The difficulty you mentioned (*in preaching*) I know a great deal about. When I was a brand new preacher I wrote to Dr. Charles E. Jefferson about pulpit techniques. He wrote me a letter which I have kept ever since. He said, "Fill your heart with the spirit of Christ and then do your best in getting that spirit over to the people." I have firm conviction that only by grace can preachers deliver sermons . . . I just came back from the confirmation class. The lesson was the 3<sup>rd</sup> article. Several members of the class felt that a person can be a Christian and neglect the church; particularly church attendance. I gave them the question, Can Christ and His church be separated? I wonder what their answer is going to be? (11/26/1954)

*After referring to Daily Bible School (summer) with 71 students and an article in Lutheran Companion about VBS,* Over the years I have had similar critical attitudes toward the S. School, Bible classes, worship and so on. Worship is for everybody - young and old - children at least receive impressions which can grow into convictions. The Holy Spirit hovers over children in the full worship as he does in Baptism. The full worship is not makeshift and must never become a makeshift. (6/14/1955)

*On many American theologians:* Much is based on subjective things - reason and feelings. Purely rationalistic interpretations of spirituality lead to something abstract or untenable, and anything in synthetic spirituality on feelings becomes "impossible fiction." Surely such

views are rather definitely pietistic, foreign to Lutheranism. Reinhold Niebuhr is perhaps the most prominent expounder of American neo-orthodoxy. I find his Duddleian Lectures 1942 "Revelation and the Meaning of History" a valuable study. I also appreciate in a special way a sermon he delivered in the Trinity Episcopal Church, Boston, in which sermon he said something about rebirth I shall never forget. In the apocalyptic system I find him together with A. Schweitzer. I find Schweitzer's interpretation more foreign to my thinking than Niebuhr's, though in the latter I fail at times to see the "red thread" that runs through the NT, which I feel must be there, even in our most modern interpretations, otherwise, the NT would be merely intellectual distractions or an emotional compassion (not divine compassion). To me the NT is a special revelation, eternal and always in the Now. Schweitzer says that history will force (I say record) history backward. I say Jesus is the Messiah all the moments of his life. From this point of view, I claim that the Lord's Prayer must be understood evangelically - e.g. "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." If we slant this petition historically as Schweitzer does we are forced to accept it as forgiveness without atonement. Niebuhr is also a kind of apocalyptic eschatologist. He emphasizes the uniqueness and the mutational power in Christ. He speaks of the unrighteous righteousness of the Pharisees. The righteousness of man is not good enough. In himself man is bound to become proud and selfishness and conceit he breaks himself and falls and his fall is deep. Only God can save man. He works contrition and repentance. He takes on Himself the sins of man as in Christ Jesus. **But there is an impassable gulf between God and man. There is no synthesis between Divine love and human love.** In the same way, I speak about faith and faith, humility and humility, wisdom and wisdom. God's grace only can see this. I am not against modern terms. I'm looking for them, and I hope that someone will give us several of them. But the "red thread" I mentioned must never be obliterated; instead made clearer.

E.g. The same sorrow Christ manifested at the time of Lazarus' death. The people thought he wept because Lazarus was no more among them. No, not that. He wept because they walked in spiritual darkness and the imminent destruction of the world. *Rehnstrom calls attention to TA Kantonen's Theology of Evangelism (1954), last two sentences on p. 59. He often refers to Kantonen with appreciation (8/15/1955)*

**ON THE DIVINE LOGOS:** Logos (in St. John's Gospel) has a peculiar meaning - unique - diametrically different from the purely human Logos or the purely human interpretation of Logos. It's a designation of Christ; His pre-existent reality, through which everything was made. I should say person instead of "reality;" but in the next world semantics doesn't always have the upper meaning. A paradox is generally a more effective technique. A man of divine faith in a paradox leans in the right direction. The divine person designated by St. John's Logos became incarnate for the salvation of mankind. (10/12/1955)

*[ON RESURRECTION: Responding to Al's use of A. Toynbee's work as historian],* Concerning Christ's resurrection, I can't help saying that because of our finite limitations we speak of this resurrection as historical, but scripturally it is more eschatological. In the glorified sense we understand the word, "This generation shall not pass away. . ." "There is here no limiting element of time; no such time between Christ's resurrection and His Second Coming; neither between His Second Coming and the resurrection of all mankind. The resurrection victory is continuous. But historically it was completed, just as Christ's death on the cross

accomplished the work He had come to accomplish on the cross. He said, "It is finished." But the atonement is spiritually dynamic. (2.2/1956)

The other day I read a paper on the subject "The Preaching Minister's Primary Message." I quoted Niebuhr briefly. At times however I find him a little too synergistic (putting it mildly). To me the believers' perfection is in justification, not sanctification. The latter then would mean that believers must make themselves somewhat holy. . . . I have a friend here who leans quite strongly on oriental thought and literature. Naturally he finds me too hard on natural idealism, man's dignity and man's collaboration with God. But he agrees with me that we must cultivate a strong sympathy with one another, even with men who have a kind of "happy-end mentality." The spiritual relation is not in human history, but where it dips down . . . it is tyrannical. . . . I have used the term cataclysmic. (3/15/56)

*He reports plans to attend the ordination in Chautauqua (June 1958) where Otto J. will be ordained.*

*Re: Stewardship* Generally congregations are low in stewardship. . . Multitudes seem to have never heard of total stewardship. Recently in two or three short talks I have said that unless the turtle sticks its neck out it won't move. Unless we stick our necks out, we won't move either. (11/17/58)

*[Re: new ministers and their training:]* The other day I heard one play hymns by ear most miserably. We perhaps had hopes that a few of our men might become theologians in a "grand manner" - in a high sense special and profound. But most of them became administrators and are doing a rather fine job at it, which no doubt, means that they lack top capacity and will for the theology indicated. We have, of course, in the active ministry many "congenial counselors." One tells me that I should exercise physically more strenuously. We are also getting a lot of chanters. It seems everybody is trying to chant. (12/29/58)

I feel that the Augustana tradition is more or less a part of my early life. . . . "The Augustana Piety" . . . In one sense I'm like Rouault when he said, 'My real life is back in the age of the cathedrals.'" (5/24/60)

The pulpit needs power - intense spiritual struggling and a high intellectual discipline. . . . In order to lift the preaching ministry out of seemingly an all-time low in superficiality it will take unyielding faith, unyielding endurance and overwhelming scholarship intervention. . . . The pastor-preacher needs more time for research, concentration and writing. And I hope that the next pastor-preachers will be very courageous and enduring. (8/21/60)

*[Rehnstrom writes words to choral anthem by William L. Memmott of Trenton, which is sung by Community Christian Choir at New Lebanon LC with story carried in DuBois Courier Express, July 29, 1960 entitled "Holy Precepts."]* Thanks for your interest in the "Holy Precepts." I suggest that the solo be sung by a mezzo-soprano and that the bass staff be powerful. Trained soloists in each staff - one or two soloists in each staff - would help a great deal. (July 21, 1961)

Concerning the value of philosophy, as you know, I lean quite heavily toward Nygren's idea of its value. If I saw no difference between Christianity and philosophy, I couldn't help asking what else is there but the latter? What is the difference between God (the very God revealed by the God of very God) and man - between the Christian religion and religiosity or the religion that seems to evolve out of the post-established church or seems to be evolving - between a unique new world and earthly place . . . . Religiosity, in which man is being deified and God displaced. God is dead. Man is God, especially in his great mobility in climbing. (7/14/61)

*[Expresses appreciation to Al for being able to "sponsor" his ordination at Detroit in June, 1962. He announces own retirement from DuBois parish, Oct. 15, 1962; effective Dec. 31]*

I experienced many failures; one climax of failure after another. But the choice was always there between faith and despair. And now I seem to feel that I was never more conscious of hope. Though I feel nihilism keenly in my flesh, I feel hope in faith more strongly. The challenge of the pulpit is both overwhelming and inspiring. Today especially the church is desperately in need of top theologians . . . I shall try to procure Nygren's latest book (*The Essence of Xy*). He seems to be even more definite that Xy is different and that it won't fuse with other religions . . . we are often quite alone. . . Last night we had a reformation service under the ministerial assn. in the First Methodist Ch. My song "Holy Precepts" was sung by the Community Christian Choir. I felt very tense, but the choir did a good job. The soloist was exceptionally good. . . The speaker was the Rev. Cedric Tilberg of Harrisburg. (10/27/62)

*Letter in December 1962:*

After the sermon next Sunday (*his last*) I shall make a post-statement in which I shall say something about the pulpit - a miracle - bottom failures and supreme joys - many dark hours and much creative light - almost, ultimate poverty and insights into the kingdom of God - terrible doubts and conflicts and special triumphs - sporadic hopes and through them a potential continuous hope. Perhaps most of the time the pulpit was an indescribable torture. But I loved it so, even when I was furiously against it. It is a great power in the hands of God. The liturgies, the texts, sacraments, the creeds are the highest things in the sanctuary worship; but the pulpit is the most dangerous place.

**Many pastor-preachers loose friends, near ones and their own corruptible bodies. The pulpit makes them feel as pain in the spine and as lonely as Christ forsaken by God, the yoke of Christ and the cross in His footsteps. But in His spirit His yoke is easy and the cross (the burden) is light. . . “Take my yoke. . . “ (12/26/62)**

Last Sept. I read a few pages from Albert Camus' writings. I'm very much interested in his philosophy. But toward the end of his short life he became more and more frantic. He seemed exhausted (spent). Perhaps so, because he could not establish any correlation between God and man. No one should be unsympathetic toward him because he couldn't help considering the Christian faith an illusion. In our day, it seems that very few will really survive the Camus world or his frustration and despair. . . Undoubtedly to him our preaching the break-through impossible barriers - something beyond our utmost powers or beyond human understanding would be unreal. (11/14/63)

Have you had Dag Hammarskjold's *Markings*? I read it and also Auden's Preface. For definite reasons we have a special sensitivity to H's development and burdens (12/29/64)

*Letter of 2/11/68 - speaks of church's difficulty in times of trouble (I assume Vietnam - Race etc)*

*LSTC Epistle notes AE's preaching for 50<sup>th</sup> year reunion - Summer 1976 AE died in 1977*

*Elsie died at the Lutheran Home in Kane, PA, at 96 (in the 1980s?)*