

LOUIS M. HAMMERSCHMIDT
BRUCE C. HAMMERSCHMIDT
LAWYERS

715 J. M. S. BUILDING
SOUTH BEND 1, INDIANA

CENTRAL 4-1103

ASSOCIATE
RICHARD D. BONEWITZ

March 5, 1958

Dr. Meredith J. Sprunger
307 N. Plymouth Street
Culver, Indiana

My dear Sprunger:

I certainly appreciated your sending me your recent correspondence concerning the Urantia book, and I am not surprised to see you take the tolerant but determined stand, and I wish you every success. May I ask if you receive any reply from Dr. Wagner, that you would send me copy?

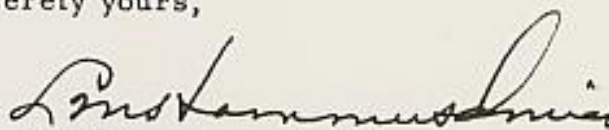
I am enclosing herewith correspondence received from our mutual friend, Harrah; also a letter from and to Rev. Meussling, that I know will be a comfort to you.

I was indeed pleased, but not surprised, to learn the reasonable attitude taken by Rev. Kroehler.

I shall be pleased to have you keep me informed of this situation, as I feel in the end it will prove successful.

With best wishes, and hoping to see you in the near future, I am

Sincerely yours,


L. M. Hammerschmidt

LMH, H
Enc.

As I wrote you previously, I submitted the Urantia volume and a miscellaneous collection of materials which had been given to me by the elder from Dr. Sprunger's church, to two members of the faculty of Mission House Seminary whose names, I will ask you, for obvious reasons to keep confidential if in my previous correspondence I indicated the two I had in mind. They are both men in whom I have as full confidence in their theological competence and Christian conviction as I have in any of the theologians of our Church. I chose them, moreover, because they are of the same seminary and graduate school as is Dr. Sprunger and could, therefore, be expected to study this material with the fullest possible sympathy for the man and the views to which he seems to be committed. The reaction to the Urantia teachings which these two theologians concur in is reflected in the following paragraphs:

"Much of the material strikes one as Gnostic. The Church rejected Gnosticism because it substituted speculation for faith and pretended to know more about Jesus Christ than the commonly accepted tradition of the Church. One can only read this material having a warning of Paul in mind: 'Take heed lest there shall be any one that maketh spoil of you through his philosophy and vain deceit, after the traditions of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ'. (Col. 2:8)

"It would be an interesting study for a retired professor of Church History to evaluate the similarities between the Urantia Book and the ancient Gnostic systems. In want of a better suggestion, the problem may also be suggested for investigation in a S.T.M. thesis.

"I personally have a hard time penetrating the depths of the Bible and appropriating its rich vocabulary. If I should spend further time acquainting myself with the 'gobbledygook' of the Urantia Book, I would be ready to have my head examined!

"As Protestants we have no 'Index'. There is no objection to reading this book. But one may also recall: 'All things are lawful for me; but not all things are expedient.' (I Cor. 6:12)

"We must remind readers of the book that the Church acknowledges God's final revelation in Jesus Christ. To claim that the Urantia Book is a new revelation is to excommunicate oneself from the fellowship of the Church.

"This book adds absolutely nothing to our faith in God as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. It is superfluous."

One of these theologians added to the above paragraphs in which both concurred his own comment in these words: "I do not see how one can harmonize the Urantia Book's teachings with the Biblical message. The Church, throughout its history, has strongly resisted a diffusion of the Revelation. Christianity stands upon the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. While the Evangelical and Reformed Church allows considerable freedom of interpretation, it has clearly stated in the constitution that this freedom is to be exercised responsibly within the context of the Scriptures."

Evangelical and Reformed Church

Office of the President

REV. JAMES E. WAGNER, D.D., LL.D., Th.D.

Schoff Building, Room 915, 1205 Race Street, Philadelphia 2, Pennsylvania

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

March 9, 1958

The Rev. Henry G. Kroehler
President, Michigan-Indiana Synod
833 Halstead Boulevard
Jackson, Michigan

Dear President Kroehler:

Let me thank you first of all for the very thoughtful letter you wrote containing observations on the matter which has been referred to a special committee of Synod Presidents of which Dr. Slinghoff is chairman. I am sure other members of that committee will have similar comments to make and I hope they follow the procedure you did of addressing copies to all the other members of the committee and I would appreciate receiving a copy in each instance myself.

I write you now with respect to the situation involving Dr. Sprunger. I read with considerable interest your letter of February 14 reporting a conference you had had the previous day with Dr. Sprunger on the "Urantia" book and movement. It seemed to me that you had moved again with wisdom and with the "Christian concern" which one of our By-Laws enjoins upon us in all instances where we are dealing with a fellow minister. Certainly, as I think I made clear in my previous correspondence with you on this matter, it was a source of real distress to me that I felt obligated to take up this question with you at all.

I am now even more greatly distressed by two developments which have come to my attention since receiving your February 14 letter. First, I am informed that on Sunday, February 16, as I understand, Dr. Sprunger preached a sermon in the church at Culver in which references were made to "traitors" and "quislings", etc., which references appear to have been easily understood as directed really toward those who have been disquieted by Dr. Sprunger's interest in "Urantia". I have no way of verifying this information. If anything of this sort did take place, it would seem not at all consistent with what you left Culver understanding Dr. Sprunger's attitude to be and it certainly would not be in keeping with the fine spirit which I myself have always thought Dr. Sprunger to be possessed with. And certainly, beyond all possibility of doubt anything of this sort cannot help but result in widening any breach which may at present exist or be incipient in the congregation at Culver. This is a matter which it seems to me you will have to concern yourself with further, unpleasant as I know such further concern will be to you.

Second, today (February 20) I have a letter from Dr. Sprunger himself reporting his having had the visit from you and saying in the second

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March 5, 1958

sentence, "May I assure you that my concern regarding the harmony and proper teaching of the people of Grace Church is identical with your judgment and Henry Kroehler's. In fact I had decided on this policy before Henry spoke to me." But then as I read on through this letter I discovered somewhat to my amazement that Dr. Sprunger had duplicated copies of this letter addressed to me bearing my name at the top of it and the salutation "Dear Dr. Wagner" and a footnote to the letter says "Copies to Grace Church Consistorsymen, members of the Synodical Council, and pastors in the Michiana Urantia Study Group". One of the most obviously unfortunate aspects of this duplicated letter is that it would tell its recipients nothing of the careful and brotherly correspondence which had gone on between you and me in this instance, nor of the strategy which I resorted to in having two responsible and competent members of the faculty of the theological seminary of which Dr. Sprunger himself is a graduate read the "Urantia" material and give their judgment upon it. I am greatly distressed at this, since none of the recipients of Dr. Sprunger's letter, except yourself, will possibly understand how carefully we proceeded in this matter.

In the course of his letter to me Dr. Sprunger proposes that the "Urantia" book and other pertinent material be submitted to "at least three" young theologians like Moss or Shinn and ask them to read the book critically and share their evaluations with us". As a matter of fact, we have already done something quite like this in asking the two theologians we did ask to evaluate the book. It does not seem to me that we are at all obligated to trouble either ourselves or another group of busy teachers with the responsibility of this kind.

In the last paragraph of his letter Dr. Sprunger tells me that, "that you may get the feel of the quality of the Urantia book I am sending you a loan copy". He goes on to say: "Would you please read from page 1495 (John the Baptist) to the end of the book. It would be good if you would check it with The Harmony of the Gospels. The light it sheds on difficult passages, where only one gospel records a story, etc. is most amazing. We hope in particular, that it may be possible for a number of young, brilliant theological professors to guide us in this matter." At this point I simply have to respond that I do not have the time to give to a careful reading of this ponderous volume and I do not at all claim to be an expert theologian and, therefore, would not consider myself competent to evaluate the book from the standpoint of the great Christian doctrinal tradition. That was precisely the reason why, rather than trust my own judgment, I chose the procedure of submitting this volume to the study of two competent theological professors.

I turn now to another consideration which grows out of your letter and Dr. Sprunger's. You had mentioned the fact that "he has had seven or eight pastors read the book who also seem to have become quite convinced of its inherent value. They meet fairly regularly once a month to discuss its message." Dr. Sprunger refers to what I take to be this group when he speaks of "pastors in the Michiana Urantia Study Group". This is one of the alarming aspects of what has developed in this connection and seems all the more to make it a matter of proper synodical concern.

March 5, 1958

Your letter mentioned, on the basis of what you learned from Dr. Sprunger, that "he has also formed a study group in the community, which has regularly been meeting to discuss the 'Urantia Book'". "They have up to the present time met in the basement of the parsonage. He agreed that it would be advisable not to have the group meet there nor in any other church building. This group includes people of the congregation as well as other people from the community and he definitely also plans to continue being a member of this study group." The trouble with this situation is that even though he participates in a group meeting outside the church and in a group made up not wholly of members of the congregation, Dr. Sprunger cannot possibly divest himself of his identification as pastor of Grace Church and as an ordained minister of the Evangelical and Reformed Church. I do not believe that either Dr. Sprunger or the Synod can overlook this very obvious fact. All of this leads me to recall the phraseology of the "Form for Licensure", in which every applicant for licensure, first step to ordination, stated, "I hereby testify that I accept the doctrinal standards of the Evangelical and Reformed Church as authoritative interpretations of the essential truth taught in the Holy Scriptures and promise to preach and teach the same. I also promise that I will submit to all admonitions and decisions of those authorities so long as I remain a member or an officer of the Evangelical and Reformed Church." It seems to me that here is a basic obligation that neither Dr. Sprunger nor any other minister ordained by the Evangelical and Reformed Church can afford morally to forget.

This whole matter is a very difficult and painful one. If Dr. Sprunger is disposed to persist in his advocacy of this "Urantia" book's teachings, we could get into a prolonged and agonizing theological dispute. His letter seems to me to indicate no inclination to respect the judgment already expressed on this book by the two theologians to whom it was submitted. My hope and prayer is that Dr. Sprunger himself, on second thought, may come to feel that this seemingly esoteric interpretation of the Gospel, if it is not an addition to the Gospel, can only eventuate in trouble for the congregation, for Michigan-Indiana Synod, and for the Church at large. If there is any truth in the report of the nature of the sermon preached in Grace Church last Sunday or the Sunday before, it would seem that the inevitable kind of trouble has already begun to break loose. At this point I can only counsel you and your associates on the Synodical Council to advise further with Dr. Sprunger in the hope of forestalling further trouble. I intended when I began this letter sending a copy of it to Dr. Sprunger. In view of the fact that according to his own letter to me, copies of his letter to me were sent to members of the Synodical Council among others, I am taking the liberty of sending copies of this letter to the other members of the Synodical Council also. Indeed, it now occurs to me that it would be wise to send to each of them a copy of an excerpt from my January 23 letter to you which will indicate the judgment on the "Urantia" book expressed by the two theologians to whom it was submitted.

With kindest personal regards, I am

Yours sincerely,

James E. Wagner

JEW/rk

cc: M-I Synodical Council

CREATIVE LIVING

A Unique Book

This is my last column in the Plymouth Pilot. I have enjoyed writing these articles for the last couple of years and much appreciate the kindness which the Pilot and many of you have shown toward me. The pressure of other duties has forced me to discontinue writing the column.

In this farewell column I should like to introduce you to the most unique, stimulating, and constructive book which I have ever read. ~~This~~ This book is entitled The Urantia Book. It was published by the Urantia Foundation, 533 Diversey Parkway, Chicago 14, Illinois, in 1955 and contains 2097 pages (\$12). There is a copy in the Plymouth Public Library if you should like to look at it.

It claims to be new revelation. This is not new; there have been many such claims in the past. The thing that is startling is the quality and profound insights of the book. I would caution you to read it not as revelation but critically as you would read any other book.

Just as students of the life of Christ recognize the superlative quality of his character even though they may reject his divinity, so mankind is destined to recognize the unparalleled quality of the insights of the Urantia Book - even though they do not accept it as new revelation. Evaluated on the basis of spiritual insight, philosophic coherence, and reality-centeredness it is far superior to any book with which I am acquainted.

I know of no one who has read the Urantia Book in its entirety who has differed, essentially, from this evaluation. I know of around a dozen ministers in several denominations who have read it and concur in this opinion. Ministers, generally, I find are afraid to read the book. They usually browse through it and make the pronouncement: "Hogwash." I did the same but went ahead and read it anyway and was amazed at its contents. Most people should begin reading around page 1495 in the Life of Jesus and read to the end of the book.

One would expect ~~that~~ any authentic revelation would be continuous with not contrary to previous authentic revelations. Although the New Testament presents a loftier view than the Old Testament, it is continuous with it. You will discover this same parallel between the New Testament and the Urantia Book. Many of the things Bible students have wondered about and yearned to know are clarified in the Urantia Book.

As you read the Urantia Book try to do so with an open mind and listen for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It stands or falls on its own inner validity or lack of it. If you only browse through the book, reading a chapter here and there, you will in all probability reject it. If you will read the entire book, you will almost certainly understand its immense significance. You will discover that it does not advocate a new religion. It cautions repeatedly concerning the dangers of fanaticism. If your religious convictions are mature and if you have grown in reasonable spiritual insight, inspired by the teachings and person of Christ, you will find that reading and even accepting the teachings of the Urantia Book will not change any of your fundamental religious convictions. It will confirm many things, which, through the guidance of the Spirit, you have surmised to be true. You will at last have a religious outlook that is worthy of the superlative teachings and personality of Jesus ~~concerning~~ concerning God as a loving Universal Father. Although the book may not change your fundamental convictions, it will add tremendously to your knowledge of God. Good reading and God bless you.