

BioGrafie – Christian O. Erbe

Sunday sermons for black sheep

(Stuttgart/Tübingen) – Christian O. Erbe is the managing partner of Erbe Elektromedizin GmbH, which is based in Tübingen. This family business, which is now in its fifth generation, develops, manufactures and markets surgical systems for medical use. The 62-year-old is at the helm of a company that has 1,700 employees and is active in 110 countries, but that’s not all – he also holds many honorary posts in universities and associations and has been chairman of the Baden-Württemberg Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BWIHK) since 2022. He is not keen on preaching, although he flirted with theology when he was younger. However, he does see certain parallels with the work of a spiritual shepherd in his day-to-day life – for example, when it comes to black sheep in the world of business.

Christian O. Erbe heads up the fifth generation of the Tübingen-based family business Erbe Elektromedizin GmbH. This highly successful company develops, manufactures and markets professional medical systems, devices and instruments. It specialises in a number of areas, including electrosurgery, thermofusion, plasma surgery, cryosurgery and hydrosurgery.

Erbe is indebted to a number of people for the company’s huge global success story. They include a very courageous and resolute woman – his great-grandmother Pauline. The company, which was founded in 1851 and grew out of a precision mechanics workshop, first experienced a major crisis in the early 20th century, when the son of the company’s founder died suddenly and unexpectedly at just 52 years old. As his descendent Christian O. Erbe puts it, “He worked himself to death”. Due to this turn of events, Pauline Erbe had to take on the company, which had already established an excellent reputation for its medical devices. In 1907, this was a highly unusual situation for a wife and mother. This chapter in the history of both the company and the family may well be one of the reasons why Erbe is such a strong advocate for improving the balance between work and family life – especially for

women – not just in his role as an entrepreneur, but also in his many honorary positions in industry and research.

A father to a son himself, one of the biggest issues he faces is how to combine his duties as managing director with his many honorary positions. Among the many posts he holds, he is Chairman of the Medical Engineering Section of the German Electrical and Electronic Manufacturers' Association (ZVEI), sits on the board of the health industry committee of the Federation of German Industries (BDI), is the Vice-Chairman of the German Society for Biomedical Engineering (DGBMT) in the German Association for Electrical, Electronic & Information Technologies (VDE), Chairman of both the Reutlingen Chamber of Commerce and Industry (IHK Reutlingen) and the Baden-Württemberg Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BWIHK), and sits on the board of the German Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DIHK). Furthermore, he is the Chairman of the Board of Trustees both for the Max Planck Institute for Biology and the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics, as well as Chairman of the Board of the Association of Friends (Universitätsbund) of the University of Tübingen. Finally, he is the Deputy Chairman of the Supervisory Board of the Standortagentur Neckar-Alb location agency and an honorary commercial judge at Tübingen district court.

Erbe has picked out all these roles specifically, since each honorary position is associated with one of the pillars of his vocation – the interplay between medical technology, science and business. Consequently, he does not find sitting on committees tedious, but instead regards the many meetings he attends as steps in striking the perfect balance between these three passions of his life. Equally, he is fully aware that he will not always be able to represent the same point of view in his role as chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry as he does in his role as managing director of a family business. "It would be wrong to make generalisations and draw conclusions about all businesses on the basis of my own company," he explains. "What's more, I can't drive medical technology forward unilaterally," he continues. As chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, he believes it is his job to explain to politicians how business ticks. "Time and again, when talking to elected representatives, I am astonished that they are unaware of the practical impact their decisions have. I tell them, 'If this proposed legislation gets through, the impact

on businesses will be as follows...’ In many cases, they are completely taken aback and tell me, ‘But that wasn’t our intention’.”

The parable of the ten black sheep

When it comes to the subject of drawing up rules and specifications for businesses, Erbe’s interest in theology shines through. “Politicians always focus on the black sheep. Think of it this way – they have a herd of one hundred sheep, ten of which are black. They can’t bring themselves to say, ‘We’ll leave the black sheep alone – after all, 90 percent of the herd is fine’. Instead, they spend sleepless nights fretting about how to get rid of the black sheep. And, of course, it’s entirely possible to get rid of them. One tried-and-tested method would be to add a little poison to the feed. The black sheep would then be gone – but so would the white ones. When policies are being drawn up, the focus is almost always on the black sheep. Why don’t we simply let black sheep be black?” The COVID-19 pandemic provides a perfect example. “The Chambers of Commerce and Industry processed more than 200,000 applications for emergency aid. This kept almost the entire staff busy, since emergency aid needs to be provided without delay. Of course, we knew perfectly well that there would be some fraudulent claims in amongst all the applications. But if we had decided that our main priority was to prevent fraudulent claims, no emergency aid would ever have been paid out.”

Erbe is the sort of man who can always be relied upon to stand up for his beliefs openly and passionately. However, it goes without saying that he also knows when a gentler tone is appropriate. “It all comes down to whom you are representing. When it’s trade associations, you can take a fiercer approach, since it’s important to be clear, and confrontations occur, too. In contrast, however, at the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, I need to proceed even-handedly, measuring things carefully – that’s even set out in chamber law,” he explains. “You need to know when it’s time to bang your fist on the table – and how hard to bang. If you bang too hard, many people may well lose sympathy with you and put up barriers.”

Intercultural experiments

Erbe was unable to get away from the issue of barriers, even during his younger years of training and travel. After studying industrial engineering in Karlsruhe and business administration at TU Berlin, he joined his father's company in 1992. "I spent three years at Erbe Austria in Vienna, where I was responsible for the whole of eastern Europe. At that time, we had subsidiaries in Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Czechoslovakia and Russia. The period right after the Iron Curtain fell was a very interesting time – and I experienced the changes directly." After that came North America. Although Erbe was originally meant to spend three years there, as he had done in Vienna, he ended up staying for eight. "My move to the USA didn't exactly go according to plan. The original idea was that I would be working with the boss there to get acquainted with the market. However, when I arrived, he immediately handed in his notice and left the company three days later. That meant I was suddenly in charge. He hadn't been doing much work and suspected things might get a bit uncomfortable for him when I arrived," says Erbe. "Unfortunately, though, that meant things became pretty uncomfortable for me. Every time the phone rang, I broke out in a nervous sweat, because I couldn't understand what the person on the other end of the line was talking about – firstly because I didn't know anything or anybody, and secondly because the English that's spoken in the southern United States is very different to the English you learn at school."

Erbe certainly had his work cut out for him. "We were virtually unknown in the United States – and our competitors were keen to stop us getting a foothold there. We had any number of legal disputes and patent contests to contend with. At the same time, we needed to invest, because we wanted to grow and build up a powerful sales team." In 1996, the company started marketing a flexible probe for the use of argon plasma coagulation (APC) in endoscopic surgery. APC is particularly suitable for stopping bleeding after an injury or biopsy and for treating certain types of tumour. "This was completely new technology at that time, and doctors greeted it with great enthusiasm. Thanks to the success of this technology, we then grew fast," explains Erbe. It was also during his early days of working in the United States that Erbe married his wife. "Our marriage is a major intercultural experiment that I embarked upon, since my wife was born in Baden and grew up in Freiburg," says the native of Tübingen, a whole two-hour drive away. The couple's son was born in Atlanta and is American. The move back to Germany in 2003 was not easy for the family, but it was

necessary. “I needed to manage the company from head office – that simply isn’t possible from a different continent. We had to build up a new circle of friends, and Tübingen seemed very small to us...” Once again, he turns to theology to explain: “There’s a strong tradition of Calvinism in this region, and there are many entrepreneurs with a very Christian background. Religion is very much part of their lives, but they don’t put it on show. There are still people who don’t like going out to a restaurant for lunch, because they’re worried people will be muttering, ‘Don’t they have work to do?’,” he says.

Inheriting a business is a privilege – not a burden

As the company’s managing director, Erbe is responsible for over 1,700 employees in 110 countries. The fact that some people in his own company might regard him with suspicion because he inherited his position rather than “working his way up” doesn’t bother him. “That’s never been a problem for me. The companies in Austria and the United States were small to begin with, too, so I had to work my way up in both these places – not as far as my job title was concerned, but in terms of building up the businesses.” Erbe also inherited his passion for medicine and technology from his forefathers. “I started thinking about what I wanted to do when I was quite young, and theology and human biology and/or medicine were always what interested me. For me, theology means working with people, leading people and understanding people. These are the jobs of a parish priest – their role doesn’t just involve preaching on Sundays. And, to a certain extent, this is also how I view my role here in the company.” The social aspect is hugely important to him. When he was asked about the war in Ukraine in a newspaper interview, he emphasised: “We need to continue to show solidarity with those who were attacked with no provocation and are leaving their homeland for good reason. This is – and remains – a task for the whole of society, and it is one we must tackle together.” And Erbe says this both as an entrepreneur and chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. “When it comes to fundamental, humanitarian issues, it’s not about representing individual interests. I don’t need to think long about it, either. Humanity commands it.”

There are 24 hours in a day and seven days in a week

Despite his impeccable time management, there are only 24 hours in a day – even for Erbe. He has therefore been forced to take a step back from various things he used to do. “In the past, I also attended operations, discussed innovations with doctors, and got stuck right into the subject matter, because I have a technical background as well as a business one.” He is therefore somewhat disappointed that he is no longer as directly involved in developments. However, he also observes that development cycles are getting longer and longer. “Our engineers always say that they spend one third of their time on the actual development – and two thirds on the paperwork. In the past, it was the precise opposite.” He therefore also values the ideas BioRegio STERN Management GmbH uses to assist the life-sciences sector. One example is the “Incisions and insights” workshop series that gives medical technology companies and doctors in the Institute of Clinical Anatomy in Tübingen the opportunity to discuss medical need and innovations directly.

Communication is part and parcel of Erbe’s everyday working life, including online. He posts frequently on LinkedIn – and these contributions are “100 percent of my own making and posted by me”. The idea of a digital detox would be unthinkable for him – even when on holiday. “I always work through my e-mails when I’m on holiday, because I don’t want to spend the whole day wondering whether something serious has happened. What’s more, I don’t want to get back and have to deal with 800 unread emails in my inbox, because that would immediately undo all the good of the holiday.” He feels this working ethos is sometimes missing in generation Z – those born between 1997 and 2012. “That generation tends to be more consumer-minded. We interview applicants who want to know whether, if they work a four-day week, they can finish early on a Thursday, like those who work a five-day week can on a Friday. That strikes me as an intriguing question to ask during an interview...”

His son will not be following in his father’s footsteps. This is one of the reasons why, for the first time in the company’s 165-year history, Erbe decided against appointing only family members to the Management Board. “The non-family part of the Management Board works extremely well. If it didn’t, I wouldn’t be able to take on all the honorary roles I do. However, the company continues to be under family ownership – the partners have specifically declared this aim,” he says. This 62-year-old therefore still has a lot to do. To relax, he tackles some heavy gardening work

from time to time, since, as he explains, “sport isn’t really my thing, even if my doctor does advise it”. And even though his company is the main sponsor of the Tübinger Erbe-Lauf race event and his friend Dieter Baumann – an athlete who has won Olympic medals – is one of the organisers, Erbe is not particularly keen on running, either. “I belong to a football club, but I haven’t been there for a good while. It would be a good idea to do sport. Maybe I’ll get round to it if I post less on LinkedIn and give fewer interviews...”

About BioRegio STERN Management GmbH:

BioRegio STERN Management GmbH promotes economic development in the life sciences industry, helping to strengthen the region as a business location by supporting innovations and start-up companies in the public interest. It is the main point of contact for company founders and entrepreneurs in the Stuttgart and Neckar-Alb regions, including the cities of Tübingen and Reutlingen. The STERN BioRegion is one of the largest and most successful bioregions in Germany. Its unique selling points include a mix of biotech and medtech companies that is outstanding in Germany and regional clusters in the fields of automation technology and mechanical and plant engineering.

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