

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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The Style and the Mission

JOHN H. TIETJEN

Pray Anyway

RAYMOND C. SCHULZE

The Brotherly Task

PAUL J. BAUERMEISTER

Life in the Spirit Today

EWALD BASH

Sharing the Body in the Body

ARTHUR SIMON

The Interior Warfare

HARRY N. HUXHOLD

Called to Service and to Seminary

DAVID S. SCHULLER

Spiritual Formation for Ministry

EUGENE I. VAN ANTWERP

Book Review

# Life in the Spirit Today

EWALD BASH

*The author is associated with the Division of Youth Activity of The American Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Minn.*

In many ways nothing seems stranger than this moment to me—to be found in these circumstances talking about spirituality. In the years since the writing of *Seven Days* I have become engaged in almost constant activity. Those who live with me in the building at headquarters of The American Lutheran Church, I rather imagine, would be somewhat shocked to see me standing here; they don't regard me as a contemplative man, and I would be a phony if I came to you and pretended I was some sort of spiritual giant. Many times I have been lost, foundering at the edge of cynicism. In the atmosphere of this time I could honestly say that another such moment might be only a day or two away. My prayers and worship are torn from me grudgingly and with much protest. I quarrel with God, despair. I am anything but regular in my formal prayer life.

Right now I am trying to grasp hope during an inner-city educational colony experiment I am leading. I just left it. I return to it. It's an immersion for myself and 25 students in the inner city of Minneapolis, with some college credits involved. Last week half a dozen of these students joined a credit union and, in seeking to prevent an illegal eviction, got involved in a hand-to-hand struggle where there was real violence. A door was kicked in. The landlord's wife threw garbage at one of the students. The police watched. I can't say where it will all end.

But listening to leaders who have been coming to us in this experiment from the urban area and gauging the situation of our time, one has feelings of futility, a sense of drift in this country, and a hint of apocalypse in the air.

The students are from a variety of private schools, a number of which are church colleges. Most of them are quite skeptical, especially when I come to them with the idea that maybe we ought to worship in the colony. After three weeks I am not certain that a style of worship can be found.

What I am trying to say in all of this is simply that I come as one person who with you seeks somewhat—if I may enter into a rather intimate part of your history—in the spirit of those marvelously human letters that Walther wrote before the Altenburg Theses.

I have been something of a renegade, if you want to know the truth of it. Someone has said recently of The American Lutheran Youth Division crew that we are "liturgical humanists." I guess I want to say that I do not necessarily reject that term. "Liturgical" implies a servant style of worship, I hope, and a quest for corporate worship that intones a chant for the line of march of the church into the future. And as for the term "humanist," let me say a word about this epithet that has been such a red flag word for Lutherans for many years. If by humanist you mean one who has put man at the center of his

fate, count me out. But if you mean by that term one who is committed to mankind, I say, "Yes." For God, as He has revealed Himself, in every way is Himself totally committed to the human race. Paul talks of one who "spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all." That is the extent of His commitment. He so loved the world that He gave His only Son. In this sense I accept the term "humanist." If my Lord has committed Himself that way, I too commit myself to the human race.

### I

I guess that leads me to the first of my questions, when I enter the area of spirituality—for I come more with questions than with answers. I am convinced that the question of whether one puts the vertical relationship first or the horizontal relationship first is a false question. That question has been demonic in the life of the church in this time, if not at all times. Because either direction implies a false situation! For the individual to presume that he is some solitary, sovereign being negotiating matters with God and his neighbor is a most arrogant kind of perspective on the matter—Christians above all ought to know this. There are no hermits in the Bible, no hermits at all. One is not baptized into a lone relationship with God, but into a community which purports to have a relationship with God. The real question then, it seems to me, comes up something like this: Can a vertical relationship between God and the horizontal community (the human community) be discovered in this idolatrous age? I submit that this is the spiritual question with which we must wrestle.

Bonhoeffer, for one, said that "God does

not intend the history of single persons, but the history of a community of persons." So the question is germane, for the church aspires to be that horizontal communion, supposedly, in some sort of relationship with God. If the church is shot through with harlotry today, it is a highly relevant question as it is for a society that is more and more a mechanized imitation of humanness. This situation was my original reason for writing the devotional series, which I understand you are going to be using this week, called the *Seven Days of the People of God*. It was a way of dramatizing the essential connection between worship in daily life, where the person is alone or at most with his family, and the worship of the corporate community of the church as it comes together. Religion then is not "what one does with his solitariness," as Whitehead once said, but is always tied with what is happening in the community of believers. The good Jew looked to Jerusalem when he prayed. Jerusalem was where the temple was, where God's presence was, and there all eyes were turned. So he sensed this community as he prayed. Or to turn toward another facet of the world's worship life—the Orthodox Catholic priest, I am told, behind the curtain prays for the congregation in some of the lengthy services. In our circles, where every man is a priest, it might be said that one goes behind the curtain of his daily life and there prays for the community. That was the original idea behind the writing of this set of *Seven Days*. The relationship of the community, the believer, and God is summed up for me in a beautiful and meaningful prayer I encountered in a World Council study document once upon a time:

Lord, here I am before Thee, in this silence, in place of my village. Thy church lies at Thy feet.

I am the dejection of A. S. who is looking desperately for work.

I am the temptation of Mrs. B., the solitude of G. on the evening after the burial.

I am J. B. and her worries about the sick people who are entrusted to her.

I am all the children who receive instruction in the morning.

I am this village, full of sorrow and affliction.

I am this old, helpless minister.

Look at all that I bring and lay down before Thee, before Thee in the silence of this night.

I am this oppressive darkness, waiting for light.

I need Thee. Hear me soon and speak to me for their sake.

Here are the person, the community, and God in a remarkable encounter that says everything about how a pastor ought to relate to his people. But it is even more than that. This prayer says how every Christian ought to be praying about mankind. "If one suffers, we all suffer," Paul says in a letter to the Corinthians. If one is honored, we all celebrate. And I'll say this, that if there is any one who suffers in the human race, the church suffers. If one manifests the image of God, even

though not a Christian, we should all celebrate the kind of community that we must have if we are to rediscover any sense of the spiritual.

In the black community there is much talk of soul. I wouldn't want to get involved in saying that I understand all of what they mean by it. But I do know that we frequently have been completely confused about what soul means. One ALC theologian said a while back that we ought to let the word rest for 50 years. But the black folk seem to know. Soul for them has to do with recognition of each other, a freedom they have in each other's presence, a sharing in suffering, a communion they intimately understand in their own music.

Neither will I define spirituality, only describe it. I will say that in some sense I feel it when I am among them. The black man knows, of all people, that he can't go it alone; and that's the beginning of understanding where spirituality is to be found. I am suggesting that we will not rediscover spirituality until we share communally in the sufferings of Christ. And that means we had better be where he is suffering and not apart from what is going on. It will be in such places that we will discover spirituality.

Here's a talking blues song that sums up what I want to say:

### THE HUNGER MAN

Well I heard a word in the Year of One  
 'Bout the hunger man and how he's done  
 And the famine coming on the other side—  
 Pakistan, India—coulda' cried  
 To hear those stories.

Children adyin' with their bellies swelled  
 And Calcutta streets looking 'most like hell;

So I hitched my trousers and made some pledges  
 To charity and all, though I guess there were some hedges —  
 Couldn't keep the interest payments up.

Then I heard a word in the Year of Two  
 Of the hunger man and how he's through  
 'Cause of things we're doing on the other shore,  
 How U. S. corporations just ain't Peace Corps . . .  
 World needin' a touch of revolution, I guess.

And I said to myself on a calm August day,  
 There's a lot to be done in a brand new way,  
 But others were aworking or so they said,  
 So I rode my own horse and got up ahead  
 To where I wanted to go — private ranch and a barbecue!

Well, I heard a word in the Year of Three  
 Of the hunger man and how he's me —  
 Eating smog for breakfast and lunch and dinner,  
 Chewing on the dollars I got when I was winner.  
 Never did like to eat greens.

And I said, Now who'll look out for me  
 And the hunger man looked in to see  
 Me weeping and moaning and looking dead.  
 He opened the door and I was led  
 To join the crowd. What a pop-you-lay-tion!

Now wait, I murmured with one last boast,  
 I've always prayed to God — that is, on most  
 Occasions, But I ain't seen him for quite a span.  
 He's lived with me, said the hunger man.  
 On a little bread and a little wine.

Well, the hunger man on the cover of *Time*  
 Don't happen, I guess, but it's sure a crime,  
 'Cause God on judgment says, That's one  
 In the order of business under the sun.  
 Hunger for justice, says the Lord.

But, of course, what I am trying to say is that a seminary built on the sands of withdrawn, solely inward reflection cannot stand. Seminarians had better be in the streets of the city practicing God's presence there; and when they learn His presence there, they will know it in the quiet of the seminary quad. There is a rhythm of going out and of coming in, of faith

words and faith acts that must be discovered in this time.

## II

But a second motif needs to be sought as well. How can I train my ear to listen to the actions of the Spirit in the world I live in, so that any event, or person, or thing can become a rubric for worship? If there is one thing that Malcolm Boyd

has contributed to in the whole business of worship, it is the feeling that any moment can become a rubric of worship. That means that in some way or another we've got to stop circumscribing the activity of the Spirit. We've got to stop limiting His speech. That demands a kind of intense listening.

My daughter was telling me last night that a cat is so disciplined in his listening that when he is looking for a mouse, *all* he hears is the noise of the mouse. Somehow or another, in like manner we have to train ourselves and our ears for the movement of the Spirit in the world, "the wind blowing where it will." It is what Jesus meant, I think, in saying, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." It is time we recognized the Pentecostal flavoring in much of what is happening in this time, and that the Spirit does not speak alone with a Lutheran voice.

I think it would be well, for instance, for us to be immersed in the folk and rock music of this age. For some time I have watched unprofessionally, but with some fascination, how the popular songs of this time have reflected the spiritual winds that have been blowing. You can find great liturgical chants in what we call popular songs, and can discover how closely they have given expression to human hopes and fears and despairs in the midst of contemporary events.

One remembers when "Blowin' in the Wind" became the beginning of the march in songs—and "If I Had a Hammer" and Pete Seeger's songs. Then came the drone of Bob Dylan proclaiming "The Times They Are a Changin'." After that came the greatest of the songs and a realization that the emperor had no clothes, implicit in

"The Sounds of Silence." This song ranks with Old Testament prophecy in what it says. Move from there to "The Eve of Destruction" or "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" and you hear the echoes of the Viet Nam war set up for discussion by the Spirit. (After all, the churches were silent.) And then came those grim songs of the drug world in which many youth, withdrawn from the war and what is going on, were singing about "incense, peppermint, and killing mankind" and that grim song's refrain, "little to win and nothing to lose." Remember "Abraham, Martin, and John," that later elegiac song of our despairs at the assassinations of the just, or the later Beatles who sing their somewhat counterrevolutionary songs, "You say you've got a revolution, we don't want to change the world"; and match that with the "Dawning of the Age of Aquarius" and "Let the Sun Shine In." Maybe today this movement of the Spirit exists in the dialog (the quarrel, if you want) between two great songs: Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" (which is practically a psalm in my estimation), and the song of the Beatles, "Let it be, Let it be." We've got to recognize that the Spirit speaks in unusual ways, even in the profanity of our times. In fact, sometimes I have a strange feeling that some profanity is closer to worship than some of the pious mouthings that I hear.

Ernie Pyle tells of a beloved captain who died during a battle in World War II. And, while the battle was raging, one by one the men went back and paid their respects to this captain whom they really loved. As one man stood there, Pyle heard him say, "O God, damn it, Sir. God damn

it." That was a prayer. That was the most appropriate thing that could be said at the moment.

We've got to listen for those kinds of accents in the streets. Time does not permit me to talk about the history of those who burn draft cards, the survivors and dead of the black bombed churches, those temples desecrated as in the day of Jerusalem. Who can state the meaning of the church becoming a sanctuary for war protestors? What I am saying is that the Spirit is not up in the sky or in the hymnals or in *Seven Days*, necessarily, or in small groups, if they represent only an escape from reality. But the Spirit operates in the life and death moment, at the point of risk.

### III

But lest I be misunderstood—don't anyone kid himself into thinking that when he moves into that kind of arena, it is going to be easy. Don't think that you won't need interior strength. I sometimes think that this is the main thing that needs to be done in our time: the building of interior strength. I think that important because I don't really regard this time with a great deal of optimism. I have hope, but I am not an optimist.

Maybe we need a different course of study, even in seminary. I ran across a seminary catalog of a different kind published in *Katellegate*, a very interesting little journal. This is Course 314 as it is described in the catalog:

Grace is one of the concepts in the letters of Paul. Each student will be required to spend from one to three months in a jail of his own choice. It is expected that the crime which gains him entrance will be consistent with Christian principles. Un-

der no circumstances will arrangements be made by the faculty. He will be allowed no books except the Letters of Paul and since this may be prohibited, each registering student should have an acquaintance with their contents approaching memorization. He will not be allowed to see any professor or fellow student during this course. Prerequisite: Three months of intensive physical training.

What I am trying to say is that we need to encounter life, and at the same time, in the same elemental way, we need to encounter the Scripture itself. We need to take the Word without all the extra ointment that's added. We need to see the Scriptures in their bareness and their nakedness and in the Presence that they bring to us. And we need to see the sacraments again (with all the quarrels and debates over them brushed aside)—see them in their pristine nature again speaking to us. For instance, for me it was a revelation not long ago to understand that the Lord's Supper is the future in the present. This meal, this shared meal, where everyone comes and there is an "absolute unconditional sharing of the bread" — what a marvelous picture of the way the world must be if it is to survive! And it is coming from the future.

And so I have a word at this point about direction, about how to march into the future. What I am saying is, I will focus again on sacraments and on the Word because there I will discover the interior strength that I need to survive. For the time when Course 314 becomes the daily bread of anyone who calls himself Christian may be at hand.

Minneapolis, Minn.