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# Editorial ✠

A Guest Editorial \*

## TODAY'S CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH

LLOYD H. GOETZ

*\* The writer is president of the North Wisconsin District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and chairman of that synod's Council of Presidents.*

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

The church has never had any other challenge than that of the Great Commission, and it ought to anticipate no new responsibilities or opportunities in the decade ahead. Nor could any task be more difficult and meaningful than that of continuing Christ's ministry.

Nevertheless, the church is in the world, and the world has changed and will continue to change. Therein lies the great challenge that confronts the church in our time. More specifically, the church needs to be aware of the nature and scope of the change that surrounds it and be prepared to minister to men in their new environment, rather than in patterns and terms of the 17th century, or even of a generation ago. To state the challenge in this way is not to belittle the heritage of the past. The tradition of the church is a gift of God and, as all good gifts, is to be received with thanksgiving. But its usefulness is measured not by its historical value, but always by the directives it gives for the present and the future.

Years ago there was a motto which proclaimed “A Changeless Christ for a Changing World.” It was a good slogan, and it is still valid. However, in proclaiming the constant Christ, we fear that the church too often feels it must continue to preach and teach Christ in concepts and through media of the past, with the result that its message has little meaning for the present post-technological world. And it is a post-technological world.

Attempting to carry out its mission under this attitude, the church finds itself in the position of a giant colossus attempting to stay astride two worlds at the same time. Or more pointedly, it suffers the embarrassment of the circus rider standing atop two galloping horses that suddenly separate.

Technology has been with us a long time, and it will be with us in the years ahead. Now, however, thinking people, especially the young among us, fear that technology has created a Frankenstein, with human values as the victim. “What is it worth?” they ask. “What has it done to give life meaning?” As Staughton Lynd of Yale has put it, “Our economy is dedicated to the production of plasticity and lethal junk.”

Our technological society has been com-

pared to the maiden voyage of the *Titanic*. The *Titanic* was, in its way, the symbol of the pride of a technological society. But the unsinkable product of slide-rule technology sank. It was sunk by an iceberg, a remnant of the Ice Age. It sank because its designers forgot to include encounters with icebergs in their calculations.

In a similar way our technicians have left out of their calculations the equation: "Man does not live by bread alone." And so they have built another "Titanic."

The behavioral scientists and philosophical analysts are saying that this is a time of change, ambiguity, and uncertainty. But is the church listening? Is it aware of what is happening? Does it know how to interpret the signs of the times with reference to its mission? Confronted with revolution, the church must make its choice.

It may close its eyes and hope that the problems of change will all go away.

Or in fear of the future it may cling to the patterns of the past and stubbornly resist every change, every new thing with which it is not familiar. It may become a walled city in a warring world, concerned only with its own salvation and the preservation of its cherished forms.

But to select any one of these options is to be unfaithful to Christ and His mission. He knew of the problems of mission, indeed, He encountered them personally. And if the church is to follow in His steps, it must learn to see these problems as opportunities.

More than a hundred years ago Emerson said: "If there is any period one would desire to be born in—is it not the era of revolution when the old and the new stand side by side and admit of being compared; when all the energies of man

are searched by fear and hope, when the historic glories of the old can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era? This time, like all times, is a very good one if one but knows what to do with it."

Does the church know what to do with it? First, perhaps, it ought to deal with the problem of its own image in the world. When it finds itself described as "inept, innocuous, irrelevant, and insignificant" and when it is charged with a paralyzing preoccupation with itself and diagnosed as "inflicted with a kind of organizational sclerosis," it ought not to react with a massive resentment, but be big enough to listen to its critics and learn from them. Criticism which leads to introspection is good, for in the process of self-analysis the church may rediscover its true nature and purpose. It may recapture the conviction that its role is to minister as Christ's servant to the world as it is now and as it will be in the years ahead. This is the great challenge that confronts the body of Christ in our time.

It was never the mission of the church to leave things as they were. Christ came to make things new. Living as it does in an age of revolutionary change, the church should find its potential to be all the more promising.

A correlating challenge, then, is to proclaim the Word—the good news of God's redeeming love in Christ—in ways and through means that will speak to modern man in his contemporary situation. The Gospel is not just a body of information which is to be brought to the attention of people. It is the very life of the church. It is the dynamo which empowers people, makes them participants in the ministry

of Christ, and changes them into servants of God and man.

If the first concern of the church is its impact on people, it will not get lost in problems of survival, but will lose itself

in service and so find itself, with the happy result that the frustrated and bewildered world will find meaning in the church.

Wausau, Wis.