

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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# Editorial ✠

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** These two editorials continue the series of guest editorials by leaders in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, invited by the staff of this journal to present their views about the opportunities and challenges facing the church today.

## RESPONSIBILITY, PURITY, and HUMILITY

The request to write a brief editorial about The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod seemed to call for a relatively simple task. After all, I have had a personal and professional involvement in the Synod for many years.

Though it has been easy to speak of “our beloved Synod” sincerely and affectionately, I find it difficult to write an objective and meaningful editorial on this subject today. Just as an individual person is a complex being, so I find a synod of Lutherans an exceedingly complex entity. Such complexity seems to be compounded in a world culture that is undergoing radical and revolutionary changes at a rapid pace which inevitably spill over into the life of ill-prepared churches and significantly affect their placid routine, their apparent stability, and their taken-for-granted posture on every vital issue.

It seems to me that the critical need for the Synod in this disturbed and challenging milieu is a call for self-understanding and identity. We need honest self-appraisal. We need to examine our history objectively, face our present situation realistically, and plan courageously in faith the future role of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in Christendom and in the world.

It is impossible to study the history of the Synod without sincere gratitude to God for His many gracious blessings. Not only has He given us a healthy numerical increase through the years, enabling the Synod to grow into a substantial church body on the American scene, but He has also blessed us with strength from a Scripture-based theology, provided us with outstanding spiritual leaders and gifted theologians and scholars, and given us bountiful opportunities to share the Gospel with many people.

As it developed, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod became known as a strong doctrinal church. There has been a predominant emphasis on dogmatic formulations in the Synod's training program for the ministry and in its public pronouncements. Probably because of bitter controversies in its history and because of its great determination to guard against rationalism and doctrinal indifference, this emphasis on dogmatics increased to the extent that a proper balance with other theological disciplines in the training of clergymen seemed lacking. This has shaped the Synod's theological atmosphere considerably.

There is some virtue in this, for the Synod has maintained a strong, clearly articulated theological stance in contrast to the vague or ambiguous theological positions common in many sectors of Christendom. This emphasis, however, has also caused some

grave theological problems. Whether intended or not, there has been a tendency in church life to act as though God's truths revealed in the Holy Scriptures have been "once for all time" capsulated in neat dogmatic formulations that have become authoritative in the Synod — if not above the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, then at least on a par with them. In my opinion, this unbalanced approach to Scriptural theology has led to a rigidity that has stifled creativity in exegesis and Biblical studies, in historical theology, in interchurch relations, and even in preaching and teaching on the congregational level.

Properly the Synod has had a continuing concern for purity of doctrine. It has maintained a deep commitment to be an orthodox church body, faithful in all its teachings to the Scriptures. No one can rightly fault the Synod for this determination, for no preacher or teacher in the church has license to teach anything contrary to God's Word. I am thankful to be a member of a church that takes this kind of a confessional, Scriptural position.

This sincere and laudable striving for purity of doctrine and the conviction that God in His mercy has kept us faithful in His truth has provided reason for humble gratitude and for a real sense of mission, as expressed in the remarkable Mission Affirmations adopted at the Detroit synodical convention in 1965.

Such concerns also lead occasionally to the expression of a valid *dammamus* in rejection of false teaching and to the exercise of responsible doctrinal discipline in the Synod. Unfortunately, in this area irresponsible, harsh, and loveless tendencies are easily developed. Individuals and churches easily fall victims to various temptations while attempting to maintain a position of orthodoxy. Pride may develop, and people may arrogantly prate about their pure church as they express judgmental attitudes toward others. In great anxiety about orthodoxy, a church body can develop legalistic attitudes and make demands for conformity that go beyond the Scriptures. Such tendencies easily develop into ugly habits of fault-finding that negate the kind of love Paul describes in 1 Cor. 13:4-7: "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous, or conceited, or proud; love is not ill-mannered, or selfish, or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up: its faith, hope, and patience never fail" (TEV). In this kind of situation all the rhetoric about purity of doctrine and orthodoxy sounds like a noisy gong or a clanging bell.

An honest evaluation of the present situation in the Missouri Synod must of necessity point to manifestations of such symptoms in recent years. To state this is not to judge motives. When people fear the loss of their theological heritage, whether justifiably or unjustifiably, their reaction frequently becomes overreaction, resulting in harsh judgments and unevangelical responses. This not only threatens to fragment our fellowship in the Gospel, but it also disturbs theological priorities. For instance, a concern to safeguard the teachings of Scripture forces some people to become overdefensive in behalf of the Scriptures. Unconsciously they may substitute formulations about the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures as the center of theology in place of the doctrine of the Gospel.

Another facet of synodical life that needs careful evaluation is the area of interchurch

relation. Space limitations restrict our comments to the fact that our record is not consistent throughout our history. Circumstances influenced and changed our practice from time to time. Sometimes we were more evangelical in keeping with Article VII of the Augsburg Confession and at other times we were more rigid and demanding. In recent years, with the adoption of positive statements on fellowship and the declaration of fellowship with The American Lutheran Church, we seem to have returned to a more evangelical posture again. At the same time there is much fear of involvement in the ecumenical movement, since many people assert that any involvement requires compromise and denial of God's truth.

The world changes and conditions in the church-world also change. Christ is still Lord of His church. Who truly knows what our Lord is planning for His church in these troubled times? Is the Holy Spirit helpless in shaping new developments in the church? If we are such a strong church theologically and doctrinally, does the Lord have a special role for the Synod besides standing aloof and carrying on no more of a ministry to our sister Christian churches than pointing out their faults in judgmental language?

Surely we must face the secularity of our world. As Dr. William H. Lazareth of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia recently stated, we must witness the Gospel content in the context of American culture. "[This] means religious pluralism. For us Lutherans this means that the days of the ethnic ghettos and the boatloads of immigrants are over. We are going to have to make it as an authentic branch of the holy catholic and apostolic church—and not as a Nordic alumni association."<sup>1</sup> Unity in Christ's church here on earth is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who surely has His own way of using the means of grace as Christians minister to each other. It is not as important to prove who is right as it is to let the Word of God have free course and to be concerned to edify one another in the faith. Here we are reminded of a statement made by Carnegie Samuel Calian of The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa: "Parochial theologizing is antiquated, if not demonic in our day. We have come from an age of disputes to one of dialogue, from divergence to convergence, from polemics to irenics."<sup>2</sup>

My prayer for "our beloved Synod" is that we may be responsive to the Holy Spirit's promptings; joyful as we live and work together in the Gospel of forgiveness; humbly submissive to God's inspired Word; ready in ministry and servanthood to one another, to the whole church of our Lord Jesus Christ here on earth, and to God's world with all of its problems, heartaches, and challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> From an address delivered at the Inter-Lutheran Conference on Church Vocations, Oct. 20, 1970, St. Louis, Mo.

<sup>2</sup> "Beyond East and West," *Dialog*, 7 (Summer 1968), 210.

## GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES

The greatest opportunity or challenge facing the church today is still the same as it was in the days when the church was founded, namely, to carry out the great commission to bring people to know Jesus Christ as Savior from sin. As the apostles turned the world upside down through the use of the saving Word, so we today must emphasize that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is still the power of God unto salvation—and the power to change the hearts of men.

This is the Word which brings to men God the Father, as Creator, Provider and Preserver. This is the Word which brings to men God the Savior, who by His endless mercy transferred the sins of the world unto Himself and suffered their pain and punishment through His sacrificial death, so that mankind might be freed from eternal death. This is the Word which brings to men God the Holy Spirit, who directs hearts and minds to the Lord Jesus, so that cleansed by His blood, redeemed sinners can call Him Savior and Lord.

To meet the opportunities and challenges which face the church today, we must continue to exalt the Lord who went to the cross and who rose from the tomb as the central object of our faith and teaching. Nothing may ever dare to supplant the cross and the empty tomb! With the apostle Paul we most assuredly declare: "God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of Jesus Christ." And with him we also believe: "If Christ has not been raised, we are still in our sins." Without that cross and that empty tomb there is no spiritual light, no assurance of forgiveness, and no hope of eternal life. As the apostle was determined not to know anything among men but Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, so we are to be determined that all of our teaching and confession and activity must be centered in the living Christ.

The church's chief task, therefore, is to present to mankind the things that are essential to salvation: God's mercy, God's grace, God's forgiveness, God's hope, God's peace through Jesus Christ. In doing so, trusting in the energizing power of the Holy Spirit, the church will present the true Gospel that overcomes sin with forgiveness, degeneration with regeneration, separation from God with reconciliation to God, condemnation to hell with the gift of salvation, eternal death with eternal life. To undergird all this, the church will stand solidly on the clear statements of Scripture and not dilute them with the opinions of men. Our church will never fulfill God's purpose if we ever develop itching ears and proud hearts that lead us to add something to the Spirit-inspired Word or to take something away from it. Nor will our church continue to survive and grow as we endeavor to build the Kingdom, unless we reject anything and everything that promotes another gospel. Our chief concern should be about sinners who are on their way to hell and who need to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We are living in days when millions do not know of the joy and hope we possess. By the day, by the hour, by the minute we can see them marching to destruction: 100 million in America, 200 million in South America, 400 million in India, 450 million in China—2 billion of the world's people still steeped in superstition, unbelief, and sin. Tragedy upon tragedy! Millions of people without Christ, without hope, without God!

And our church has what they so desperately need: the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ!

To meet this challenge of leading millions to know Christ we dare never be ashamed to reach out with the saving Gospel in our own Jerusalems, Judeas, and Samarias — even to the ends of the earth. We need God's forgiveness for moving like snails when we ought to be running for Him. We need God's forgiveness for becoming so involved in church structures and institutional life and for forgetting that man has more to live for than the things of this life, that we do not get out the Word of Life to so many who need Him. Hoard the Gospel for ourselves? Never! We need to share it with others as others shared it with us.

I believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is still the only power that can check the powers of darkness, that can bring a healing influence into the affairs of mankind, and, most important, that can give men eternal peace. When the church is committed to its primary task, then the Holy Spirit, working through the Gospel we preach and teach and write and witness, will make unregenerate people into believing disciples of the Lord, who as redeemed men and women will bring their influence to bear on a cruel and chaotic social order as they become a shining light and a savoring salt to their fellowmen.

I am not unmindful of the physical and social needs of our fellowmen. If we confess Christ as Savior, how can we be unmindful of His helping and healing and serving ministries, as well as His atoning ministry? His "inasmuch as . . . you have done it unto Me" must surely be joined with His "whosoever believeth"; the words, "As, therefore, you have opportunity, do good unto all men, especially to those who are of the household of faith," should be our way of life. "Let us not love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth" should be second nature to us! Yet, when all is said and done, even after wiping out all slums and poverty and hunger and starvation and killing and injustices (if this were possible), men would still need conversion to Christ.

Jesus still says: "I am the Way . . . no man comes unto the Father but by Me." And the Bible still says: "Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved." As I see it, this is the greatest opportunity or challenge facing the church today: to proclaim the good news of salvation in Christ for the conversion of sinners. For the church trusts in God's promise: "My Word shall not return unto Me void."

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