

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

---

The Edifying Word: The Word of Hope

PAUL G. BRETSCHER

The Binding Nature of Synodical Resolutions  
for a Pastor or Professor  
of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod

ARTHUR C. REPP

Evangelization and Humanization

WON YONG JI

Brief Studies

Homiletics

Book Review

Volume XLII

March 1971

Number 3

# Editorial ✠

OLIVER R. HARMS

*The author, president of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod from 1962 to 1969, now serves as resource consultant to that synod's board of directors. In addition, he is currently a guest lecturer at Concordia Teachers College, Seward, Nebr. During the summer school sessions of 1971 he will be teaching a seminar on "The Pastor as Churchman" at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.*

## *Repentance*

There is a significant and continuing place for repentance in the tradition of the Christian church. Repentance appears as a term in popular language, as a theological concept, and as a churchly practice. I note this history in passing because we live in a time when repentance as a term seems unfamiliar and repentance as a practice is infrequent.

Many modern men judge the concept of repentance to be irrelevant. The practice of repentance is obviously unpopular. There are reasons for this circumstance. When scientific achievement has been so phenomenal that the impossible has become probable, who then dares to blame men for failure or call them to repentance? When behavioral science offers more rational and pleasant escapes, why then not trace unfortunate human conduct to a domineering father or a doting mother? When men predict—I thought of saying either promise or threaten—that they will be able to engineer improvements in the human being in order to eliminate or to control all weakness, then there is little need to talk or think about repentance.

Men are talking and acting as if they were gods. This is the reason they either do not or do not want to think and talk about repentance. Repentance is for creatures, not for gods. Repentance is a confession of sin, and there is no sin where there is no God above men.

The point I am leading to is this: Repentance reflects a man's relation to God. When creatures do not recognize and give glory to God their Creator, then they are godless. When men give to themselves or to others the recognition and glory that belong to God, they are idolaters. Obviously, the church knows that God as Creator and Redeemer, as Just and Justifier, is not satisfied simply to be a disinterested spectator of those who carry labels, whatever those labels may be.

History is the record of God's effort to make men aware of their relationship to Him. In doing so, God speaks to men in many languages. He has ways of talking to men so they listen with their eyes as well as their ears, so they sense with their stomachs and with their nerves. Through it all, whether He smashes men and their idols or whether

He moves in the terrors of nature, He makes this clear: He is the Creator and man is but a creature.

As churchmen we are especially conscious of God's own record as given in Holy Scripture. Here God has reported, with His own commentary and interpretation, how He deals with His creatures. The story of the early beginnings describes the awful story of the Deluge, an event so terrifying that God promised never to repeat it. The building of the tower of Babel marks an important milestone in human history, for it records how God intruded in human affairs.

God sent prophets to preach repentance in particular situations. He directed Jonah to "cry against" Nineveh because the wickedness of that city offended Him. As in the case of the Deluge, God granted time for repentance. In the face of God's threat to overthrow and to destroy the city, the king of Nineveh showed his penitence by his dress and his conduct. He practiced and preached repentance for all inhabitants in the hope that God would turn away from "His fierce anger, that we perish not."

God makes His justice be a servant. When God puts His creatures in their place even by acts of violence, then He seeks to preserve the created world as a place of reason and order and civilization. When God brings His creatures to their knees, His ultimate purpose is to make them sons of grace, not slaves of fear. God spares nations, and He nurtures His church because He seeks the welfare of all that He brought into being. No one portrays better the yearning of God than John the Baptist, who came to prepare the church and the world for the coming of Christ.

It is from this vantage point that the church views the international strife in Indochina and the Middle East as well as the noise that occurs when God shakes the earth through quakes, tidal waves, hurricanes, and tornadoes. The church does not do enough when it simply supports the Red Cross and relief efforts for Nigeria and Pakistan. The church is not faithful if it does no more than call attention to Christ's final return at the appropriate time in the church calendar. The church fails its people when it publishes only an occasional discreet article on repentance in a theological journal. God has been addressing the church in a special way in our time. Not only the church itself but even the general public is aware of the great difficulties that afflict the church from within and without.

By all He says and does, God wants us to ask about the cause of our distress. We must know that if all is not well among us, then all is not well between us and God. The church has responded with apathy on the one hand and with extremism on the other. Apathetic churches fail to deliver a strong message of judgment and of mercy. Extremist churches preach a message of legalism and pharisaism. Neither is faithful to the charge given by God nor worthy of support. In between are the great numbers of confused and bewildered Christian people who suffer agony and anxiety as they try to analyze what is happening to the church and wonder to whom they should give their trust.

It is time for the church to know that repentance must begin at the house of God. The church cannot afford to ignore its plight nor the causes of its distress. A first response of penitence is for the church to know it is guilty and to be silent, knowing

that the church also is under the judgment of Him who has the right to cast the first stone. A second and necessary response must be a clear declaration of the wrath of God upon the impenitent. We in the church dare to expose ourselves to God's wrath because we trust Him for His mercy. We dare to surrender ourselves because we place ourselves into the hands of the Father who will neither quench a smoking flax nor break a bent reed.

A penitent church is a committed church. Forgiven people know what it means to be free in Christ Jesus. The church will not yield, for it must proclaim what it has seen and heard. The penitent church will not compel God to call forth His praise from stones.

The penitent church is an active, selfless church. Forgiveness in Jesus Christ is both the message and the style of the penitent church. It knows how to proclaim the mercy of God with the same fervor as it proclaims the judgment of God. The penitent church knows how to remove the mote from the brother's eye and how to prove its words with its work. The penitent church works while it is day, but looks forward with rejoicing to the last great day. The signs of the times stimulate the penitent church both to its mission in the world and to its own great fulfillment of God's promises.

The penitent church listens to its Lord and proclaims the message He speaks to His disciples of all time:

And Jesus answered them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the sufferings. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because wickedness is multiplied, most men's love will grow cold. But he who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come." (Matt. 24:4-14)