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THE DAVIDSMEYER MEMORIAL LECTURES

I. What I Expect of My Pastor In the Pulpit

(Condensed)

NORMAN A. GRAEBNER

Professor Norman Graebner, son of a Lutheran pastor, is Chairman of the Department of History at the University of Illinois. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago; taught at Iowa State College, Stanford University, and the University of Illinois; delivered the Commonwealth Fund Lectures at the University of London, 1958. The author of numerous books and articles on American politics and foreign policy for popular and scholarly journals, he is at present Contributing Editor of CURRENT HISTORY. He was formerly a member of the Missouri Synod's Board for Missions in Foreign Countries.

IN LARGE measure my presence here . . . is an act of courage as well as indiscretion. For me to speak on the subject of what a layman might expect of his pastor in the pulpit is presumptuous. The questions raised by this theme must be answered in theological terms, and I have at best but an inadequate layman's knowledge of Luther's theology. Nor can a layman properly speak for anyone but himself. . . .

In large measure, the words of the individual clergyman, spoken from the pulpit, cannot be separated from the declarations of those church leaders who speak the mind and will of the church as a national and international body of believers.

All clergymen, whatever their role, face the problem of discovering the relationship between the complex elements in Christian thought and the requirements of individuals in their earthly search for a proper relationship with God and man. If the answers to such questions are beyond me, I can take some comfort from the fact that I was not invited to appear here as a theologian, but rather as an historian and layman with a broad interest in a changing world—a world, it would seem, that is not always changing for the better. It may be true that our best years as Lutherans, as Christians, and as Americans already lie in the past.

Today we find ourselves as members of Western civilization assailed by forces which threaten to destroy our values, our security,

our freedom, our traditional role as the dominating force in world society. In this there is tragedy, for we, as Christians, cannot be totally absolved from all responsibility for what has occurred. The modern world as we have known it was created, planned, and governed by a Christian-oriented Western civilization. . . . Wherever missionaries entered such teeming countries as China and India, they enjoyed the support of established political power. This Western-dominated world of remarkable stability, therefore, was characterized not only by the vast internal development of the Western nations themselves, but also by the European-styled structures that lined the boulevards of Cairo, Bombay, Saigon, and Manila. It was not strange that Western Christian churches and missionary societies supported the colonial policies of their nations as well as the liberal democracy on which Western society was built. . . .

That the Western democracies achieved far more than the triumph of middle class ideals and democratic processes is obvious. But they were also guilty of failure. In the wake of their successes they left a tradition of white dominance, colonial repression, poverty, disease, maldistribution of income, low business and political ethics, and poor statesmanship that led to World War I. One might wonder what a powerful Christianity did to mitigate the unresolved challenges of that age, for there are few problems of human relationships which do not have ethical implications. Did the spokesmen of Western Christianity, enjoying unprecedented prestige and opportunity, identify themselves with human betterment or business profit? Perhaps they favored both, but in retrospect it seems clear that the latter too often took precedence over the former. For churchmen as much as businessmen material success became the major standard of value. In their partisanship they courted the danger of destroying allegiance of one or more elements in the societies to which they spoke. Warning against the perpetuation of this tradition, Professor Alfred M. Rehwinkel wrote a decade ago: "The Church must beware lest it become a tool of any social class that happens to be in power, ready to condone, sanction, bless, or defend the wrongs of such a social class. The Church must remain above class and party and impartially, without fear or favor, censor, correct, or condemn when fundamental moral principles or divine precepts are violated."

For thoughtful Christians of this century the writings of the prophets are not without meaning. For them it was God who created

all things and held all individuals and nations in His hands. What He demanded of His creatures was clear. Those persons and nations who failed to respond to human misery with justice, mercy, and love were in danger of destruction. As Isaiah warned the children of Israel: "Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness which they have prescribed; to turn aside the needy from judgment, and to take away the right from the poor of my people, that widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless!" Later prophets dwelt on the same theme. To them the enemy was as much within as without.

It was the human weakness of the Christian-democratic world of the nineteenth century, not its successes, that today has placed it on the defensive, challenged by the two dynamic movements of the century—nationalism and communism. . . .

This altered world comprises an inescapable challenge to us as Americans, as Christians, and as Lutherans. Yet in a sense we have not responded positively as a Church to these changes. We have not developed any body of social thought which would identify the Church with any of the problems which have arisen either at home or abroad—problems that have given rise to the ideological challenges which we face.

II.

Perhaps our church's emphasis on individualism and individual salvation has served as a strong inducement to avoid the necessity of creating a social philosophy. Yet it is doubtful if any church can remain so aloof from its environment that it can exist without declared and vigorous attitudes toward things mundane. It seems quite clear that the Lutheran church's devotion to individualism has created and sustained a social philosophy of extreme individualism.

This is not without benefit, for the church has not succumbed to the social gospel movement. It has maintained its historic gospel mission. Challenging the tendency of many churchmen to speak out too often on too many subjects, Ralph W. Sockman, formerly of NBC's *Radio Pulpit*, declared recently: "Churchmen act as though they feel they have to pontificate on any problem and, having spoken, tend to assume that there is little more to be said. This is boorish behavior as well as bad theology. It leaves little alternative to those

who disagree but to stay away. Thoughtful members of contemporary society are doing this in droves."

But in rejecting the social gospel the church has continued to accept many elements of the American "Gospel of Wealth." Too often our clergymen have paraphrased these nineteenth century views of Bishop Lawrence on wealth and morality: "Put ten thousand immoral men to live and work in one fertile valley, and ten thousand moral men to live and work in the next valley, and the question is soon answered as to who wins the material wealth. Godliness is in league with riches."

Often it seems that the Lutheran church, in its identification with Modern America, has adopted the Puritan concept of stewardship, expressed so well by Daniel S. Gregory in his *Christian Ethics*: "By the proper use of wealth, man may greatly elevate and extend his moral work. It is therefore his duty to seek to secure wealth for this high end, and to make a diligent use of what the Moral Governor may bestow upon him for the same end. . . . The Moral Governor has placed the power of acquisitiveness in man for a good and noble purpose." If there has been within the Church no widespread acceptance of the concepts of social Darwinism, its emphasis on individualism has often made the church appear as one of the most powerful proponents of the views of Herbert Spenser and William Graham Sumner in American society. Its tendency to laud wealth has made the Church appear unduly materialistic. Its refusal to concern itself positively with the great changes that have been wrought in modern society by the impacts of population, industry, urbanization, and other forces which tend towards confusion, insecurity, and impersonalization have not demonstrated a lack of interest but rather the acceptance of a philosophy of laissez faire in preference to a philosophy of social change.

This absence of any feeling of obligation to the specific problems of our society illustrates more than a traditional theology of individualism. It reveals as well a lack of knowledge among our religious leaders in the fields of economics, sociology, political science, and history, for without such knowledge it is impossible to frame a considered and meaningful response to the challenges of a changing environment. Without such knowledge, one must either deny the existence of change or assume that all fundamental political and social pressure is illegitimate and thus does not merit the attention of the Church.

This absence exposes a fundamental dilemma suggested by Dr. Sockman's observation of a decade ago: "A sermon will convey life to its hearers in proportion to the amount of life the preacher has put into it." Preaching has been defined as "discourse developed from divine revelation and designed to move men through and toward the divine will." By this definition a sermon is not a call for an immediate and overt response, but an attempt to challenge the listener to a more responsible personal and social life. It dismisses the emotions of hope and fear in favor of responsibility and service. It emphasizes the common appeal to a fuller life.

III.

Today we find ourselves as Americans and Lutherans assailed as much by forces abroad as by those at home. Whether we have in the past been sufficiently cognizant of the new forces in world politics which seem to threaten our security, our freedom, and our traditional values is doubtful; our reaction as a church seems to parallel that of many elements in American society.

During the twentieth century the United States has conducted an experiment unique in the annals of diplomacy. Unlike the great nations of the past, which sought always to wield effective power in defense of their own interests, the United States has conducted its foreign relations for the declared purpose of serving humanity. Woodrow Wilson admonished the American people in 1915 that they "created this nation, not to serve themselves, but to serve mankind." American leadership in this century has anchored this messianic purpose not to the nation's material strength but to abstract principles of freedom and justice. . . .

That the American effort to achieve this rational world of freedom and democracy has failed is evident from the experience of the century. This globe looks far less like Utopia today than it did fifty years ago. . . . This failure of good intentions does not mean that the ethical principles of Christianity are inapplicable to world politics; it means simply that the fundamental principles of Christianity have been misunderstood in this century. To the extent that Lutherans have made no effort to counter the liberal Protestant philosophy to which these notions have been anchored, they have contributed nothing to the preservation of that environment which, in retrospect, appears so superior to that of today. . . .

It is not the primary task of Christian ethics to sit in judgment of the past; rather it is to find the rules of present conduct that will best mitigate the dangers of personal and national conflict. From Christianity's profound truths on human relationships must emanate principles that will contribute to some resolution of international conflict. Even in the world of sovereign nations where the standards of individual morality do not apply, Christianity still speaks with a powerful voice. For historic Christianity has never taught men how to create a perfect world, but how to live in one that insists upon being imperfect. . . .

Christianity above all asserts the sinfulness of human beings. It places upon men the duty to be tolerant toward one another. Christianity more than any other religion accepts the view that there is something worth saving in every human creature. Although it brings to bear a consciousness of sin, it forces no man to be a slave to his own evil past. It seeks not to encourage but to destroy the limited feeling of guilt which modern man often desires to impose on his defeated enemy. Perhaps it is paradoxical that the highest and most spiritual view of life is that which begins with the assertion of universal human depravity. It is this realization that causes men to set limits to their dreams and to their legitimate demands on others.

To Christ, as the gospels reveal, it was the self-righteous who most flagrantly defied the spirit of His teachings. . . .

Jesus' attitudes toward sin were exceedingly subtle. He was no Puritanical crusader. It was His way to overcome evil with good. This explains why Jesus devoted more effort to arousing the respectable than to restraining the disreputable. The Gospels gave little attention to the flagrant physical vices, but much to the subtle sins of the respectable. In the parable of the man who fell among thieves on the road to Jericho, Jesus did not denounce the crime of robbery, but the lack of sympathy and neighborliness in the respectable. In the story of the prodigal son, Jesus did not condemn the wayward youth for his licentious living, but rather the brother for his refusal to forgive. Perhaps Jesus found it unnecessary to condemn the more flagrant physical sins, because such vices have a way of begetting their own punishment. Jesus attempted to awaken the so-called good people to those shortcomings which were often not obvious either to them or to others. . . .

It is a fundamental weakness of the self-righteous that they view sin as not against God but against themselves. Perhaps the greatest menace to our civilization today is the application of self-righteousness to affairs among nations. Each infraction of what a well-meaning nation chooses to call its moral principles is employed as a pretext for instilling deeper hatreds and animosity. It has been this feeling of moral rectitude that has brought so much barbarism to recent conflicts, for each nation uses the supposed wickedness of the other as an excuse for its own determination to unleash the maximum of destruction. Under the conviction of innocence punitive action ceases to be vicious but becomes a reasonable measure of judgment. When nations finally drop completely the notion that sin is a crime against God and regard it as a crime against man, when man arrogates to himself the power which Christ specifically denied him—the right to determine and punish sin—there can be no end to the resulting atrocities.

It seems strange that many Lutheran spokesmen have refused to challenge those tendencies in foreign affairs which deny the concepts of sin and which assume rather a perfectable world in which unusual criminals in positions of power stand in the path of universal peace and freedom. Historic Christianity, because it recognizes human frailty, should be able to face challenges from abroad without evasion—without the fundamental utopianism of those who believe that all would be well with the world if it were not for a few misanthropic leaders always identified with the nation's enemy for the moment. . . .

To attribute all wickedness to a political enemy and regard one's own cause as righteous denies both the Christian concept of humility as well as the evidence of history. . . .

IV.

Today the quest for a world in which Christianity might prosper finds its great impediment in communism. To challenge those Christian leaders now involved in preaching a crusade against the communist menace is not to deny the troublesome implications of that ideology. It is comparatively simple to catalog the tyranny and misuses of power which have characterized the actions of communist leaders wherever they have been engaged in a struggle to establish or maintain their authority. . . .

For many Christian leaders, Lutherans among them, the only Christian answer to this special challenge to Christianity must lie in an intensive program of education to acquaint American Christians with the tyrannical and anti-Christian aspects of communist society. . . .

This crusading approach to the communist challenge raises questions of concern to students of world politics. First of all, dwelling solely on the evils of communism ignores the failures in western society which have made its successes possible. Recently the Rev. John C. Bennett, dean of the faculty of the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, warned Christians that it cannot be assumed that God is always on the side of the west. "It is our temptation," he said, "to assume that, because our opponents are atheists, God must be on our side, and to overlook the extent to which communism itself is a judgment upon the sins and failures of the middle class world, upon the Christian world. The very atheism of communism is a judgment upon the churches which for so long were unconcerned about the victims of the industrial revolution and early capitalism and which have usually been ornaments of the status quo, no matter how unjust it has been." The persistent condemnation of communism as the one great evil of this age reinforces rather than challenges an individualistic philosophy, and tends to concern those who join the crusade with matters beyond their control permitting them to ignore the problems at hand. . . .

It is not clear how a victory over communism is to be achieved except through the superior example and performance of a Christian-oriented western society, operating through evolutionary historical processes. Any other approach will lead to war, for communism cannot be divorced in world politics from the military structure of the Soviet Union. . . . Those who have attempted to turn the cold war into a holy crusade are destroying the toleration and humaneness which must come to international relations if there is to be a future for mankind. . . .

The Rev. Ralph L. Moellering has warned in *Christianity and Communism* that communism will not be destroyed by military might or by hatred and suspicion. "The antidote," he writes, "lies in evincing genuine Christianity to the world, rather than the Marxist caricature. It lies in the doctrines and the life of Jesus Christ. It lies in the application of vital Christianity to social living."

V.

One can hardly portray, from the limited knowledge and time available to a single layman, the total response of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to problems which beset a Christian society both at home and abroad. That response has not been monolithic. Nor is it within the competence of any individual layman to determine what that total response should be. Reflecting as it does a primary concern for the salvation of the individual rather than the perfection of human society the church's response appears Biblical indeed. It has reflected historic Christianity in its truest sense. It has sustained the concept of salvation in a world which has in large measure rejected its need or denied its efficacy. It has preached high standards of personal conduct in a world of crime and delinquency. Yet the church's emphasis on individualism has sustained a social philosophy which rejects the obligation that the church need respond thoughtfully and positively to the challenges of contemporary society. This philosophy has permitted the church to advance through the century officially unmindful of the world in which it has existed, as if the changes in that world could neither aid nor hinder its work. In adhering closely to the principle of rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, it has tended to be exceedingly uncritical of national policies even though those policies are the creation of institutions that have no Christian purpose and involve the nation in problems which detract from God's purposes upon this earth.

What then might the Lutheran layman expect of his pastor in the pulpit? Certainly no diminution of the Gospel message. But beyond that one might anticipate an awareness of the world environment and the implication of Christian ethics to the church's response to the challenge of that environment. This is not a plea for partisanship, for the church has long harbored a partisanship which transcends that of any other American church. The great problems which confront us as Lutherans, Christians, and Americans has no relation to party or even to specific social philosophy. Such challenges to Christian complacency as inadequate education facilities, racial conflict, population pressure, urban crowding, national security, nuclear armaments, Germany's future in a divided Europe, world communism, and the fundamental questions of peace and war, have hardly been faced by any political organization on the globe.

For such questions the tolerance and understanding embodied in Christian ethics must have some meaning. To bring Christian thought to bear on them requires a knowledge so profound that the solutions must remain in part a counsel of perfection. But the worldly challenge to Christian leadership cannot be ignored. As Professor Rehwinkel has written: "The only hope for the world . . . is a revitalized, virile, and functioning Christianity." Nicholas Berdyaev, the Russian philosopher, expressed the problem somewhat differently: "The only thing to pit against integral communism, is integral Christianity; not rhetorical, tattered, Christianity; but renaissance Christianity working out its eternal truth toward consistent life, consistent culture, consistent social justice. . . ." Only thus can the church discard that traditional complacency which demands no more of the believer than the acceptance of a personal redemption and keeps him unmindful of the admonition that the church wields the potential power for the redemption of society as well.