

4. Shaping Society — Social Action

Richard Klann, Ph.D.

Every revolutionary attempt is powered by a dream regarding the possibilities of human attainment: it may be the dream of reason which people have dreamt since the beginnings of Western Enlightenment or it may be the dream of an ideological utopia which has captured masses of men during this century.

The present revolutionary ideology, which seems to have invaded Lutheran seminaries in America also, is a combination of many ideological elements. But we can easily recognize large quantities of Marxism and questionable elements of Freudianism as well as the existentialist seasoning.

It is an ideological mix most congenial to those who agree on the agenda (à la mode Marcuse) that everything in our society must be turned into its opposite: our freedoms are seen to be devices to enslave us; our democratic ideals become mental perversions; our economic prosperity is the opium of the masses; we are accused of being dehumanized in America because too many of our people have too much. The revolutionaries want to liberate us all by making everybody at least as miserable as the sociological underclass to which they seem committed, even though they obviously despise them.

Some teachers at American seminaries seem to have joined other radicals in their program of declaring that the society in which revolutionary professors live and those who support the institutions where they teach are evil beyond redemption. This is also their way of justifying anything that they may say or do against their enemies. For them, offices must be seized in any way possible for the promotion of the revolution, and public relations is the means of supporting revolutionaries by telling the truth selectively.

The most dangerous virus invading the Lutheran churches is false doctrine promoted in the pulpit, in the classroom, or in the publications of the Lutheran churches. Every false doctrine taught in our churches is not merely a sign of unbelief or apostasy; it may also be a sign of an intended subversion in the church.

Despite some pious disclaimers by public relations experts who seek to win the support of men of good will, and sometimes capture it, such attempts at subversion should not be overlooked. Our people should learn to understand the salesmanship of some of our ecclesiastical bureaucrats when they peddle the line that no one teaches false doctrine or observes objectionable practices. Our Christian people ought to see clearly that these church leaders follow a policy of vigorous praise for Lutheran confessional claims or statements and determined action to further liberal or non-evangelical programs. When they appear at District Conferences it seems they try to give our people the "verbal gloss" treatment about the most vital issues. In some places they seem to have done a remarkable selling job.

If the experience of both the ancient and modern Christian churches show what may happen to our Lutheran churches and to us, then we surely do have every reason to present to the open light of day our Christian witness on the topics which concern the fidelity of the stewardship of the Lutheran churches in doctrine and practice.

That we are assembled here is another witness to the fact that Lutheran churches have been infected with false doctrine. Specifically, the loud and insistent pleas for healing in my own synod are clear evidence of a widely articulated desire to have no more tranquilizers distributed by those who

seem to be public relations experts in the disguise of pastors of the Lutheran Church.

As Christians, it is our disposition to think well of all those who claim the name of Jesus Christ. But the radical drift in our midst will not disappear by wishful thinking. If we believe that "judgment must begin at the house of God" (I Pet. 4:17), it is obvious that we shall have to confess our choices and live with their consequences.

The assignment given to me:

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may raise the expectation among you that I am going to assume the function of a social planner or of a social engineer, full of ready answers or at least a box full of band aids for the ills of our times. I will not do that. Good programs of social action have been formulated among us and they are available for use in a congregational setting. I intend to propose for your inspection several major theological issues and affirmations about Christian ethics pertaining to social action.

THESIS I: Social action in the Christian Church must be an expression or product of the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*).

St. Paul states our thesis thus: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God — not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Eph. 2: 8-10 RSV)

When we speak of the order of salvation in Christian theology we mean broadly all that is mentioned by our creedal affirmations, ranging from our creation to our glorification at the end of time. [In a narrower sense, the *ordo salutis* has been understood to apply to the Christian's pilgrimage from conversion until death.]

In our Lutheran understanding of the order of salvation we maintain the unity of the work of redemption: the work of atonement by Jesus Christ and the work of renewal of the Holy Spirit by the means of grace. We confess that God the Creator is also God the Redeemer and God the Sanctifier.

Specifically, we say with the Gospel that this God, in the Person of the only-begotten Son, was made man and born of the Virgin Mary. We say that this birth or incarnation of the Son, whom we confess to be "very God of very God," was an historical event, and that we have an account or description of it in the Gospels.

Evangelical Lutheran Christians see a total contradiction between their understanding of the source and dynamics of social action and the proposals emerging from humanistic or non-Christian ideologists. The point is of such great importance that we must take time to explain it.

The best of men may seek to advance their society by considerations of human need. Social disorganization and squalor offends their aesthetic proprieties. Some men also carry with them the ideal of a better quality of human life than they observe in their society. Not only do they wish to become benefactors of their contemporaries, but some know that their own welfare depends on at least a minimal social peace and economic prosperity.

Nor should we conclude that only prudent considerations impel non-Christians to social action. We should readily acknowledge that such people may theoretically seek maximum justice for all members of society. In fact, their sensitivity for the oppressed of this world may be so effectively expressed in their ideological propaganda that by comparison they seem to make Christians appear to be inactive in areas of social action.

Apart from such observations, we should also note that interest in particular areas of social action can change even more rapidly than the hemlines of our ladies. Very likely, the cries for more social action in the Lutheran

churches, from the offensive actions of some representative individuals at Denver to the latest harrangues of unappeasable actionists in various areas of service in the Lutheran churches, do not seem to have their source in the order of salvation nor derive their force from the Gospel which is the power of God unto salvation.

Perhaps a much more likely explanation of their zeal and offensive behavior lies in their expectation of extracting or extorting from the Lutheran churches large quantities of cash to be used ostensibly for their special programs. Some may be most content to bask in the public exposure of an opportunity to denounce the Lutheran churches. Those who threaten Christians with some form of implied violence or disruption of their meetings certainly do not beseech them evangelically by the mercies of God.

The Lutheran understanding of the order of salvation, which is the source and dynamic of Christian ethical action, asserts that the new creation is that redeemed man who lives by his faith in the Redeemer. This life of faith is not a mere verbalization or a pious phantasy of Christians, but the new reality for man, continually moving him from task to task in a life of repentance until the consummation of God's promise at the end of history.

God declares the sinner a saint on account of the work of Jesus Christ. Without this Savior, a man can do nothing. The Christian therefore always remains the sinner who is a beggar before God and at the same time is a just and righteous man in the power of God's promise. He is totally God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that he should walk in them.

The Christian's justification is an alien righteousness. As Luther said to his students who were impatient for better things: We have not made it yet; but we shall be like Him, as He has promised. No psychological explanation can be offered to explain the nexus between the simultaneous state of the Christian man as saint and sinner. The mystery of the work of the Holy Spirit who continually works faith in our hearts by the means of grace, so that Christians confess the one Name given under heaven whereby they must be saved — that mystery must be proclaimed, not explained.

It is therefore a distortion of the Lutheran understanding of the order of salvation if we teach in such a way that our Christian love becomes the source and dynamic of social action. St. Paul said it rather differently: "The love of Christ constrains us."

The "Mission Affirmations" of the Missouri Synod's Detroit Convention of 1965 were unsatisfactory to many pastors and laymen because the "Theological Basis of the Mission of the Church" was used for ambiguous or unacceptable applications. Since the six "mission resolutions" of Floor Committee I refer to "Report of Mission Self-Study and Survey, I. Theological Basis of the Mission of the Church (CW, pp. 113-123)," we have the right to assume that the latter document must be studied for the proper understanding of the six resolutions presented by Floor Committee 1.

A Statement of Principle of Social Action, adopted by the Denver Convention (*Proc.* p. 141 ff.) in response to the overtures submitted (CW, pp. 393-396), must surely be considered a partial correction of the distortions implied by the rhetoric of the Detroit "Mission Affirmation." Significant is this quotation: "When the church becomes involved in social ministry and action, it needs to understand not only the principle of love but also the 'distinction between Christ's kingdom and a political kingdom,' as defined in the Lutheran Confessions." (*Proc.*, 1969, p. 142.)

THESIS II: All proposals for social action, as well as all pastoral admonitions, must be made only after Law and Gospel have been clearly distinguished pertaining to such proposals.

The implications of this thesis, derived from Art. V of the Formula of Concord, must be considered after some comment on the meaning of the key

terms. The Lutheran churches of the 16th century were seriously troubled by a menacing confusion regarding the meaning of the Gospel. Melancthon had taught his students, somewhat on the order of our "Lutheran Barthians" today, that the Gospel is also the teaching of penitence (*doctrina poenitentiae*). It was done in such a way that the biblical distinction of repentance and forgiveness was covered up in the understanding of Christian.

That is very far from being a minor matter today. I have met many students in classes which I have taught who had come to the seminary convinced that it was "old fashioned" or "fundamentalistic"* to say that programs of social action must be powered by much more than a general feeling of love for those in need.

Some, unfortunately, seem to come out of our educational system full of hostility to the confessional truth regarding the necessity of distinguishing clearly and at all times between Law and Gospel.

Let me quote from our confessional distinction between Law and Gospel (F.C., Art. V., Tappert, p. 561 f.):

Strictly speaking, the law is a divine doctrine which reveals the righteousness and immutable will of God, shows how man ought to be disposed in his nature, thoughts, words, and deeds in order to be pleasing and acceptable to God, and threatens the transgressors of the law with God's wrath and temporal and eternal punishment. For as Luther says against the nominalists, 'Everything that rebukes sin is and belongs to the law, the proper function of which is to condemn sin and to lead to a knowledge of sin' (Rom. 2:30; 7:7).

The Gospel, however, is that doctrine which teaches what a man should believe in order to obtain the forgiveness of sins from God, since man has failed to keep the law of God and has transgressed it, his corrupted nature, thoughts, words, and deeds war against the law, and he is therefore subject to the wrath of God, to death, to temporal miseries, and to the punishment of hell-fire. The content of the Gospel is this, that the Son of God, Christ our Lord, Himself assumed and bore the curse of the law and expiated and paid for all our sins, that through Him alone we re-enter the good graces of God, obtain forgiveness of sins through faith, are freed from death and all the punishments of sin, and are saved eternally.

Since the beginning of the world these two proclamations have continually been set forth side by side in the church of God with the proper distinction.

The failure to distinguish between the function of Law and Gospel is demonstrated in the "Report of Mission Self-Study and Survey" (*Convention Workbook*, 1965, p. 113 ff.). The author fails consistently to differentiate between Christ's work for the world and our task in the world. In his presentation that "The Church is Christ's Mission to the Whole Man" (*ibid.* p. 117, col. 2) the writer argues that the distinction between "spiritual" and "material" is an illicit or an "impossible" distinction, so that "material" interests are just as important as the "spiritual" interests of man:

God's mission to the world in Christ brings human life to its fulness. This is the intention of the redemption. The whole of man, not only the soul, is meant to have eternal life here now in time.

The view implied seems remarkably close to the notion of "godmanhood" advocated by the late Paul Tillich in his *Systematic Theology*, II. But Tillich did not invent the notion of an ontic transformation of the conditions of this existence in time. Philosophers have suggested that the idea came to the West from India early in ancient times. After all, Hinduism does offer the hope of divinity and a place in the Hindu pantheon to the devotees.

Our Lord Himself has made a clear distinction between the values pertain-

FOOTNOTE

*Incidentally, while I personally prefer the term "orthodox," it is my growing conviction that the term "fundamentalist" is now rapidly becoming a "code word" for "believer" and that it expresses the furious aversion of some within the church for the Person of Jesus Christ and for His work of redemption.

ing to body and soul in a statement which many of our people probably memorized in confirmation class when they studied the First Commandment: "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matt. 10:28) For this aspect of his preparation the author could with profit have recalled the last lines of Luther's great hymn:

And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child and wife,
Let all these be gone,
They yet have nothing won;
The kingdom ours remaineth.

The confusion of Law and Gospel is bound to result in false expectations of what the Christian or the Christian churches can do in the world. Where in the Scriptures are Christians urged to undertake "a real partnership" with non-Christians? It may be a good recommendation for those who are confessed or surreptitious proponents of the social gospel. But neither our Lord nor His disciples ever recommended a real partnership with the world. Christians have no more guarantee that they can save Western culture than the Christians of the early church possessed regarding theirs.

A major topic for the consideration of social action, and also an aspect of the distinction of Law and Gospel, is Luther's interpretation of the distinction between Christ's kingdom of power and His kingdom of grace. All men live in the kingdom of power, but only the disciples of the Lord are in the kingdom of grace. Social justice achieved by social action is always desirable in the kingdom of power, and we ought to testify to all those who exercise magistral power that they owe this obligation to God.

But the Gospel, His word of forgiveness, pertains to the kingdom of grace. The context of events in Luke 12, where our Lord refused to intervene in a dispute between brothers concerning an inheritance on the grounds that such a work was not part of His redemptive task, should make it clear to any thoughtful reader that the Christian Church as the mystical body of Christ has no institutional mandate to organize for social action. But there is no such limitation on the service of Christians. Members of the churches should assume responsibilities for social action in accordance with their callings, opportunities, and abilities. They may organize to the limits of their resources for such tasks which serve the neighbor and the society in which both live.

According to Luther's understanding of the "secular" (*aeuszerliche Ordnung und weltlich Ding*) in relation to the "spiritual" (a distinction like Law and Gospel observable to the reader also in the exposition of the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*), it is simply false to direct the Christian churches to invest their resources and energies in the promotion of aspects or programs of the social gospel. After all, the Christian is only *in* this world, but not *of* this world. Services to the world — yes; "a real partnership" with the world — no. The very idea of the Church as "Christ's mission" is a contradiction of the notion of a "real partnership," because both are impossible. Our Redeemer "partook" of the conditions of existence of the human race when He was born in order to save that which was lost. The notion that He ever entered into "a real partnership with the world" is completely foreign to the Gospel of the New Testament.

One of the memorable descriptions of Luther's encounter at Marburg is his famous word to Zwingli: "You have a different spirit." Despite all sorts of well-publicized denials, it should be obvious even to the least attentive in our midst that a different and alien spirit is being heard and apparently followed in our theology; specifically in the areas pertaining to social action. We should carefully take note of this fact and draw proper conclusions from this. Then the Holy Spirit, who witnesses to the Gospel in our hearts, will also clearly lead us "into all truth" in accordance with His word and promise.