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The Self-Understanding of the Church

MARTIN L. KRETZMANN

The theme of the 1965 convention of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod will be the words of our Lord to His disciples when He appeared to them on the evening of the day of his resurrection: "As the Father has sent Me, even so I send you." Special attention will be given to the latter phrase in devotions and essays, and the whole convention proceedings will center in the concept that the church, the body of all who believe in Jesus Christ and accept Him as their Lord and Savior, is sent into the world on His mission, to continue to carry out till the end of time the purpose for which the Father sent the Son into the world, namely, to reconcile the world to Himself.

In all our thinking and talking about this subject it is necessary that we restate clearly and forcefully our unequivocal faith in the Scriptural truth "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" and that "God showed His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Nothing that we say about the church being sent into the world as the Father sent the Son must be allowed to detract from

the "once-for-allness" of the atoning and reconciling work of Christ.

The relation between the Word which God speaks to us in the Incarnation and the Word which He speaks to us in the Cross and Resurrection is well stated by Wilhelm Andersen in his small booklet *Towards a Theology of Mission*:

The Incarnation alone does not yet bring to the world the fulness of salvation, the reconciliation. In the days of His earthly ministry, Jesus did not yet send forth His disciples into the ways of the Gentiles, and He Himself did not carry on "a mission to the heathen." Before that can happen, the divine word of reconciliation must first be spoken; the one sacrifice for sins must first be offered and accepted by God. Only after the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit does God Himself give the sign for the beginning of the world-mission of the Church.¹

It is the purpose of this article to try to look at the church in the light of our Lord's "word of sending" and to understand what this means for the self-understanding of ourselves as the pilgrim people of God.

We will all generally agree that an image of the church has been shaped in our minds by many different influences. Although the term *church* here refers primarily to the local congregation, it has reference also to the denominational grouping of congregations.

¹ Wilhelm Andersen, *Towards a Theology of Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 51 f. Andersen's point here is not to be understood as a rejection of the Biblical doctrine of objective reconciliation.

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How is the image of the church formed in our minds? In the case of the clergy we shall all agree that the catechism teachings about the church which we studied in earlier years, as well as the seminary teachings of later years, have had a certain influence in shaping this image. They have provided a certain framework and background to our thinking about the church, at least in the area where we make doctrinal statements about the church.

But this, we will probably also admit, is not the complete image. Many other factors have contributed to our understanding of the church. Chief among these would be the activities in which the church engages, the manner in which it carries on its program, and the theological basis that is laid in its promotional material.

A simple illustration of this might be the way in which we exhort people to be regular in church attendance and faithful in their support of the church's program of work through their offerings. If our exhortation is phrased in such a way that it leaves an impression in the minds of people that the faithful performance of these two duties is an end in itself, or that these two constitute the full expression of their religious life, then it is inevitable that the image of the church will be that of an institution which exists largely for itself and that the people exist for the sake of the church. It is almost equally inevitable that church attendance and more or less adequate offerings of money will be looked upon as a favor done to the church. This is the image which has taken shape in the minds of many people in the church. The church, whether on the local level or the denominational level, is thought to consist of the clergy and the officers of the church

who have a program which is to be supported by the larger body of the laity. It is tacitly assumed that the church is essentially the concern of the ordained ministry and that the people, although technically thought of as constituting the church, have primarily a supporting role.

On the other hand, if the concepts we express, and the words we use, are such that the life of the church is understood in its relationship to the world into which the church has been sent as the body of Christ, if we understand the church as the whole people of God living its life as the church in the world, then the institution will be understood, not as the object of the people's concern and support, but as that gift of God to His people which helps them to be about their Father's business. The laity will then look upon the church as something which they need, not as something which needs them. Regular attendance at worship will result from a deep-felt need to hear the Word of the Gospel again and again so that they may be the church wherever they are in the world. They will realize then that they need the church so that they can be the body of Christ in those places where the limitations of time and space do not permit them to be physically present. As they understand what they are individually and collectively in the world where God has placed them on His mission, they will see the need of some instrument through which they can be present in other places and areas of man's life in the world. The image of the church will then be that of a movement in which they are totally involved and which they need, rather than that of an institution which must be supported and which needs them.

No one who knows himself and understands that he is the microcosm of all of man's tendencies to live self-centeredly and selfishly will believe that a more Scriptural understanding of the church will come about intensively and extensively by the waving of a magic wand. If we have become conformed to the world by giving to the institutional aspect of the church a degree of validity which it does not deserve, if we have looked upon it as an end and not a means, then we can only begin to transform our thinking by trying again to understand the church within the framework of God's plan of salvation for the whole world.

I

"As the Father has sent Me, even so I send you." These words of our Lord after His triumphant resurrection give the church its place in the eternal yearning of God for the world which had turned away from Him. These words, as we know, were spoken to those who believed on Him and had been chosen to be His disciples. We know from the Gospel records of our Lord's ministry that before these men could be taken up into the mission of our Lord they were themselves the object of that mission. As our Lord came "preaching the Gospel of God," they were led to faith in Him and received power to become the sons of God. They heard His Word and believed on Him who sent Him and received eternal life. They were incorporated into His mission to the world through becoming partakers of His life, members in the community of the redeemed as well as of the redemption.

It is in this way that we must understand the church as the mission of the Triune God to the world. As God is the Author

and Source of that mission, so the church becomes God's agent to the world through which His love is witnessed to and demonstrated. The most concise statement of this character of the church as God's mission is given in 1 Peter 2:9 f. All of the four great designations which Peter uses to identify the New Testament church as the construction of the Old Testament people of God have the dual character of telling what God has done, while at the same time defining what this means in their relationship to Him and His mission to the world. The four qualifications—a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people—are all emphatically related to the "in order that" which introduces the second phrase, namely, "that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." The great acts of God by which the church is able to appropriate these titles to itself have the necessary concomitant of witnessing to these deeds to mankind.

In his excellent study on *The Missionary Nature of the Church* Johannes Blauw puts these two parts of the verse before us in their proper connection:

Only *as* the chosen race, *as* the royal priesthood, *as* the holy nation, *as* God's own people is the Church of Christ called and able to proclaim the wonderful deeds of God.²

Many will agree with Blauw when he says:

It is really incomprehensible that so often in the history of the Christian church this clear and obvious statement has not been understood in its unity-duality, but has

² Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1962), p. 132.

been split apart, or even that the proclamation of the wonderful deeds of God has been confined merely to a hymn of praise behind thick church walls. No doubt the "churchly" hymn of praise is also asked and intended. The praise of God in the sense of creation and thankfulness is closely connected with praise. But the true praise is not only an internal Christian affair; it is witness in and for the world. In the praise of the community of Christ, God (finally) receives from His world the answer which He has awaited from the beginning, as the human echo to His divine approval (the "very good" of Gen. 1:31) of the work of His hands.³

Perhaps it is not as incomprehensible as Blauw thinks. When we remember how often a roaring logomachy has been started by exegetes because they have forgotten the purpose for which the sacred Scriptures were given to men, it is not so hard to understand how easy it has been for us to forget why the church has been created by God. Just as every word of God is a missionary word and is spoken to man to bring him back to Himself and must be understood in the light of that purpose, so the church can only be understood in the light of God's purpose for the salvation of the world.

By its very nature, then, the church is related to and is a part of God's plan of salvation for the whole world. Everything else we may say about the church, about its traditions, about its doctrines, about its life, must be understood in the light of, and must be made subservient to, this understanding of its purpose as the people of God, sent into the world as His mission to the world.

II

We must now place this picture of the church alongside of the picture of the church which we know and try to understand the twofold character which the church presents to the world. This twofold character consists in the fact that it is at one and the same time the people of God, the body of Christ, sent on the mission of the Triune God to the world, and also an institution which necessarily structures itself on lines closely parallel to other institutions in the world. As the latter it has its constitution and bylaws, holds property, and promotes various kinds of services for its members.

Nothing that is said here is intended to deprecate the value of institutional forms, or is to be understood as an expression of anti-institutionalism. No event in the history of our faith, or for that matter in the history of our life in the world, is without its institutional aspect. Even the mystical and wonderful relationship between a man and a woman has its institutional aspect. Our purpose is rather to understand how these two aspects of the church are related to each other.

There has always been a tendency on the part of some in the church to attempt to abolish all institutions and to look upon the church merely as an amorphous fellowship of Christians held together by a spiritual oneness of being and purpose. Perhaps if we were not also blood, flesh and bone, normal human beings with normal emotions and attitudes, such a fellowship might be possible. But this is not the way things are, and it does not appear from the ways of God with men that He intended them to be so.

Our difficulty does not arise from the

³ Ibid.

existence of institutions and forms but from the exaggerated value that has sometimes been placed upon them and the distortions to which they have sometimes been subjected. We are all familiar with instances where the preservation of a man-made institution has become the paramount concern, and the purpose for which the institution was first brought into being has been sacrificed or placed into a position of secondary importance.

We are also aware that there are aspects of the institutional life of the church which have derived from the cultural and historical environment in which the church took form and grew. The history of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod would furnish many examples of this. We have no reason to doubt that when these practices were first developed they were an answer to a particular need and were closely related to the purposes of the church as it understood itself. They were, in a sense, an answer to questions which arose out of the environment of the church and were, therefore, legitimate. We also know that in many cases these particular forms have been invested with a sanctity which was never intended, and they have now become endowed with a sense of validity which has no relation to their original purpose.

When we look now at the essential character of the church as the people of God sent into the world as the body of Christ on His mission, we realize at once that it is this aspect of the church's nature which alone gives it the right to participate in that mission. It is the people of God who have been caught up into His life, who have eternal life, and therefore have the right to come before the world and

proclaim the great deeds of God, and the church has this right precisely because it is itself the product of those great deeds. No ecclesiastical institution can claim this for itself; it can only claim to have validity when it conforms to the essential character of the church and its purpose.

It would not be realistic to believe that it is easy to maintain this understanding of the church in the kind of world in which we live and when we know the kind of people we are. There is in all of us, and in this we only reflect the fact that the world is still too much in all of us, a tendency to substitute form for function and to make the function conform to the form which we have created and which we have come to treasure and love. We must constantly remind ourselves, and be reminded, of who we are so that we can be liberated from the tyranny of institutions and look upon them as our servants.

An illustration of the manner in which the image of the church as an institution has served to obscure its character as the body of Christ on His mission to the world can be seen in the attitude of different denominations and their member congregations to one another. While we all confess to the truth that Christ is not divided, that His body must be one, that therefore His mission to the world in and through the church must also be one, and that the final purpose of this mission, the restoration of man to fellowship with God, must also be one, there is very little demonstration of this conviction in the life of the churches. On the contrary, we may become so concerned about our existence as an institution that we fail to give solid and continuing evidence that we recognize our essential oneness in Christ. It seems that

we often do not pursue the goal of Christian unity with half the energy which we devote to lesser goals which perhaps contribute more specifically to the glory of the institution.

III

When we speak of the church as the people of God, we mean, of course, all the people of God without distinction between clergy and laity. It is this church which is the mission of Christ to the world. When Peter designates this people as the "royal priesthood," he refers to all who have been called out of the darkness of alienation from God, the darkness of not having an identity, of being "no people," because of their separation from the life of God. They are called into the light of fellowship with God; they have been brought close in the blood of Christ.

When we understand the church in this way it becomes clear that any tendency to equate the church with the clergy, or to confine the mission of the church to any particular group, or to exclude any part of the people of God from the responsibility of being in Christ's mission to the world, is in conflict with the nature of the church.

There has been much written in this area in recent years, mainly as a result of the intensive Biblical studies on the relation between the Israel of the Old Testament and the church as the new Israel. This has modified the ecclesiology of the past few centuries and has opened new vistas of understanding in the Scriptures. Unfortunately one of the by-products of much of this talk about the importance of the laity has been that the institutional church has tried to create more activity for the laity within the walls of the church, to get

the laity "more involved" in what is going on within the institution, rather than in understanding that an entirely new concept of the laity as the church is needed.

On the other hand, however, there are signs that the laity is growing into an understanding of its proper role in the church, and at the same time, of the role of church in the world. This understanding does not grow out of an increased awareness of the particular uniqueness of the denomination to which they belong. Rather it grows from an understanding of what it means to be a member of the body of Christ in the world. Men and women of all denominations are recognizing that they are able to meet one another as Christians in the world and to carry out their function as the people of God in a way which transcends denominational affiliation and loyalty without denigrating the value of such a loyalty or suggesting that such a loyalty is out of date.

Such an understanding on the part of the laity arises from their grasp of the truth that all who are members in the body of Christ, whatever denominational membership they may hold, are members because the Holy Spirit has created saving faith in their hearts through the Word of God and the sacraments and that it is faith alone which enables and authorizes them to be in the mission of Christ to the world. On this basis they are able to approach their fellowmen and invite them to share in the life of God by witnessing to them of the great deeds which God has done for all men. However much they may value the teachings of their own church, they have understood that they are saved by faith and not by truth, that is, by a mere intellectual acceptance of Christian doc-

trine, and this understanding has set them free to witness to what God has done for them and to invite their fellowmen to share in this great gift.

IV

If we understand that the church is Christ's mission to the world, then we realize also that it is engaged in telling to men all that Christ did in His mission to the world. The church does not look upon man as a disembodied soul any more than Scripture views him as such. The love of God expressed itself in the incarnation of His Son, in His becoming a man among men, and the Son shared many of the experiences which man falls heir to because of his being an imperfect person in an imperfect world. Nothing that was human was outside the range of His mission.

It can only be with thankfulness to God that we remember the many ways in which the church throughout its history has manifested the love and concern of Christ for all the needs of man. The record of Christ's healing ministry through the church as His mission in medical work, in social welfare, through education, and through all other efforts to help man realize his potentialities to serve God and man as a full human being is such that we must thank God for this understanding of His purpose for all His creatures.

It is important, however, that we do not look upon these expressions of Christ's love and concern apart from our understanding of the total mission of Christ. There have been chiefly two distortions of this aspect of the church as Christ's mission. One has been to look upon these activities as a way in which to get at man's "soul," to help him in his immediate felt need so that he can be brought under the influence of the Gos-

pel. The other is to detach these activities entirely from the concern of Christ for man's spiritual needs and to carry them out on purely humanitarian principles.

When we look at the Scriptural teaching about man, we understand that he is always looked upon as a total personality composed of spirit and matter during his earthly life and that God's redemptive and glorifying concern is for man as man. The fact that the Son of God became man makes it impossible for the church to neglect the physical aspect of man's being. Our belief in the resurrection of the body, even though it will be a glorified body, convinces us anew that the whole man is meant to have everlasting life and that this life is given to him now in this world, as he is, through faith in Christ and will reach its fulfillment in his fellowship with God in the world to come.

When the church acts in such a way that it creates the image in the minds of men that it is concerned only with the "soul" of man, it is not only untrue to Christ's mission but also gives the impression that it is really "out of this world" where the life of man is lived in the body as well as in the spirit and mind. The criticism that the church is largely "irrelevant" to the present world grows out of this misunderstanding of the church's true nature. It is of the greatest importance here that we are careful in our use of words when we speak of the world and the life of man in it so that we do not unintentionally create in the minds of hearers an understanding of creation and man's place in creation which is not true to Scripture.

The self-understanding of the church, then, includes also the image which it has of itself as the community of those who are

concerned about everything which was of concern to our Lord in His mission to the world, the spirit, the mind and the body of man, and not any of these in isolation from any other.

V

The church as the people of God in Christ's mission to the world is also the firstfruits of the new creation (James 1:18). It is placed into the world as the bearer of the mind of Christ, the creating Word, to witness to God's purpose for all His creatures in the world of His creation. The church understands the purpose of man in the world, the reason why God has placed him there, and the function of man in carrying out the purposes of God.

In this understanding of itself the church cannot be indifferent to the social and governmental structures through which God provides for the world and His children in it. The purposes of these structures are divinely ordained, and the church alone knows this divine secret. As the mission of Christ in the world the church must continually witness to God's purposes for these structures, and through its witness seek to identify and inhibit the demonic tendencies of man to use the structures of society and government for the destruction and enslavement of his fellowman's personality.

We cannot be indifferent to the fact that when the church has undertaken this responsibility, it has often been charged with "meddling" in politics and reminded that its business is religion and it should stick to that and leave the affairs of the world to men of the world. The fact that the charge is made in this way is sufficient evidence that the critics of the church do not know what the church is, and it is, perhaps, also evidence that our self-understanding is not

what it should be. If we look upon the church as the clergy, who are, by and large, insulated from the realities of social and political life because of the demands of their calling, there is much truth to the advice that amateurs had better stay out of the game; they often get fatally hurt.

But this difficulty arises precisely because some have understood the church to be the clergy exclusively and have not sufficiently understood the implications of the truth that the church is the people of God. These people are out in the world and totally involved in all that it does. The church does not achieve its purpose by organizing a pressure movement of some sort at the instigation of the clergy by engaging in power politics. It lives and carries out its mission to the world and its structures through the people who are the church. But it does not leave these people to witness to the purpose of God and the Lordship of Christ in isolation from the rest of the body of Christ. The whole body concerns itself about the will of God in these matters and then focuses all its concern and mission on the one person, or several persons, who are in the midst of these decisions, embraces them with its gifts, upholds them with its prayers, and protects them with its solidarity of purpose.

The church is not starry-eyed about this process. It knows that it is striving against principalities and powers and that a utopian kingdom of God will not come into being on this earth as long as man is man. But it also knows that it must be true to its nature as the body of Him who was the suffering Servant and that no rebuke which came to Him is outside the destiny of the church which bears His name.

VI

When the church understands itself as the body of Christ in the world in His mission, it will realize also that it has an ambiguous character in relation to itself. Its people know that they are justified through faith and that all who have accepted Christ as their Savior are worthy of the title of "holy people." But it also knows that both individually and corporately it has not yet attained, and will not attain in this life, to the full stature of Christ.

Knowing this, the church understands that it must continually be concerned about speaking the Word of the Gospel to itself and to all other members of the body of Christ. When any branch of the church as we know it refuses to be in mission to other parts of the body of Christ, or does not permit them to be in mission to itself, it is creating an image in the minds of its people, as well as in the minds of members of other churches, which is untrue to the nature of the church. It is in effect denying the oneness of the body of Christ and the interdependence of its members.

The profession of our faith in the oneness of the church and the unity of all who believe in Christ must not be denied by lines and acts in isolation from our fellow members in the body of Christ. Such a course can only create an image of the church in the minds of members which often forces them to live lives of frustration. We may not be happy with some of the structures which have been created by men to permit Christians of various and separated denominations to come together in their mission to one another. It may be that succeeding generations will see God wiping out all these structures so that He can bring something new into being. But

we dare not refuse to live in the time into which God has placed us. . . .

VII

Our Lord's words to His disciples, "Even so send I you," open our eyes to the church's "sentness." It is only within the framework of this understanding that we can understand "missions" correctly. The church is the "mission."

Perhaps only one who has been deeply involved in "missions" can witness to the uneasy feeling that arises when we use such phrases as "Missions is the real work of the church" and "We are spending too much money on education and not enough on missions"; or when a local congregation is accused of using too much of its money "for itself" and not giving enough for "missions," even though the congregation itself is in mission to the world around it.

When the church has this self-understanding that it is the mission of Christ to the world, when it refuses to live for itself as an institution, when it spends its life in Christ's mission, there is no conflict and rivalry between the various activities which it must carry on as the mission. When this takes place we need have no fear that "missions" will suffer, that there will not be men and women who will be willing to go into places where the mission of Christ has not yet gone, or that hands and hearts will not be generous in their desire to share in the mission also. But we will never be able to do the latter with the joy and the commitment which our calling demands of us until we understand that we are the mission, every one of us, in the place and time into which God has called us in Christ.

"As the Father has sent Me, even so I send you."

St. Louis, Mo.