

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Editorial

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Editorial ✦

During recent years the Christian church has been living with a collective sense of guilt which has been sapping its spiritual vitality. Voices are raised in the church which assume full responsibility for the plight of modern man and which castigate the church because it has not been "relevant." The racial crisis, the rising rate of alcoholism, declining standards of public and private morality, deterioration of family life — for these and a thousand other problems the church has been urged to accept at least partial responsibility. The church has frequently forgotten to offer the message of God's forgiveness to itself. The church has sometimes failed to read the history of the world's past to discover that each generation of "modern man" has suffered many of these same afflictions.

This paragraph is not meant to be a bland defense of the church's role in the 20th century. It is intended to offer some comfort and some perspective to God's people before we proceed with some pre-Lenten soul searching. Our own church has perhaps not faced up to the question of its share of guilt as acutely, certainly not as publicly, as other bodies have done. Several things account for this: (1) we have not been noted in the past for manifesting a strong social conscience; (2) we have regularly reminded ourselves that the Gospel is, by definition, irrelevant and unappealing to modern man. We find it to be so ourselves insofar as we remain "modern men"; (3) we have always preferred to do our laundry in the basement.

Where our past attitude toward social problems has been defective, we deserve to be faulted. We are making great strides, but we still have a long way to go. In these remarks we want to take a long look at the second point. Is it enough for us to say that the Gospel will never be relevant or attractive to natural man and thus defend our record of community impact, soul gaining *and soul keeping*? Isn't it important that we address to ourselves the question: Has our use (we deliberately choose the word *use* instead of *proclamation*) of the Gospel been as relevant as it could have been?

Two factors thrust this question upon us. The first is the content of this issue. Randolph Crump Miller's article maintains that the Gospel has a chance to make its impact, to be relevant, only in a "dialogical encounter," preferably involving small groups. This runs counter to some of our tradition which has prompted pastors and teachers to act almost as if the Gospel were a magic formula which will accomplish its results through the mere speaking of Scriptural words to man. "My Word shall not return unto Me void," we have often reminded ourselves. We have sometimes behaved as if we could complete our job with a troubled person by quoting a Law passage and a Gospel passage, either from the pulpit or in the study.

If Miller's thesis is correct, and if all the authorities he cites in support of his view are correct, then we shall have to take a long look at the nature of our Christian ministry,

our *διακονία* to people. It has far-reaching implications for the pastor's work, for the day school and the Sunday school and for our professional training schools.

In a sense Theodore Ludwig's article also forces us to look at our *διακονία*. We believe it is a searching analysis of the message and life of Jeremiah which the careful reader will not quickly forget. When we studied doctrine, we learned some passages from the Book of Jeremiah. The only one we regularly remembered was, "Turn Thou me, and I shall be turned" (Jer. 31:18). (The RSV reads: "Bring me back that I may be restored.") This passage was used to prove that man behaved in a *purely passive* way during his conversion. We still believe this, and we believe the passage demonstrates this truth, but Theodore Ludwig has opened windows on this book which show that there is far more here for modern man, for modern Jeremiahs, than this truth.

This leads us to the second factor which prompted this editorial. Some in our church are currently concerned about many things. This should not surprise us, and it must be said that the majority of our people are not at all panic stricken. The church is living and growing, and she will suffer growing pains as long as she is in this world. All of us are trying to analyze the reasons for this concern. Some are looking for a single answer. We should like to suggest an answer which may partially explain our present disturbed condition. We have always been a body which emphasized propositional theology. This term has gained prominence in very recent years as a description of what was formerly called systematic theology. Propositional theology is marked by the setting forth of religious truths in the form of absolute statements which the church member is required to accept. These statements are either taken directly from Scripture or based on Scripture by processes of deduction which are usually quite plain and obvious. We are grateful to God for this heritage and utter here, publicly, the prayer that we shall always be strongly marked by a high regard for propositional theology. We pray that our systematians will continue to say, "Thus says the Lord," as the Biblical evidence warrants.

However, in very recent years another type of theology has gained prominence in our circles, a theology which cannot be simply and easily described. The label "Biblical theology" is not adequate, for our theologians have always been Biblical theologians. The label "inductive theological discoveries" versus "deductive" formulations is no real help. One could use the term "*heilsgeschichtliche* theology" if one always had 15 pages at his disposal to define precisely what is meant by it (it required 27 pages in the October issue of this journal). Let us say that it is Biblical theology and that it focuses our attention in a primarily inductive and exegetical fashion upon the contemplation, study, and adoration of the God who acts mightily in history for the redemption and final salvation of His people.

The new emphasis upon this kind of "Biblical theology" requires the addition of certain terms to our theological vocabulary; it may require the redefinition and the modification of some of the wonderful systematic terms in our heritage, simply because these have become colorless through long use. Every denomination is facing the question of what to do with the fruits of the Biblical research of the past 50 years. Some have

in effect accepted them lock, stock, and barrel. No major group, to our knowledge, has turned them down in similar fashion. Honesty compels us to say that until recent years The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was one of the few major denominations which was in danger of following this course. Now, it seems to us, that the Lord of the church is being particularly good to our body by giving us men who will not let us ignore the newer Biblical studies. Men of our church in teaching positions at every institution and in parishes in every District have tasted the fruit of *heils-geschichtliche* theology and have found it relevant and useful for proclaiming the message of the gracious God who loves all men and who has acted in Jesus Christ for the redemption of all men.

And so there is confusion, tension, and even strife in our denomination. There is at times what seems to be an "impenetrable fog" as representatives of the two schools try, sometimes vainly, to talk to each other. They often fail to see that they are singing the same hymn of adoration to the incarnate and crucified Savior, even though they are using different words and melodies.

But we should not oversimplify the problem. That will not help. There are dangers in the current of present Biblical studies. And so our men pan the waters earnestly, looking for every drop of exegetical gold. There are dangers also in the systematic approach, and so our men work earnestly to make systematic theology meaningful and relevant to members of the church at every level.

The discussion will probably be with us for a long time. In this pre-Lenten issue we suggest two things: (1) Concentrate on the wonderful grace of God in Jesus Christ, and make sure this comes through clearly, regardless of how you say it; (2) pray God for the grace to share in the profit from the best of our heritage and the best of current Biblical and systematic studies.

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