

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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THE QUIET REVOLUTION

AMIDST ALL THE THEOLOGICAL TUMULT AND SHOUTING OF OUR DAY, a quiet revolution has been taking place in the church in the area of mission thought and practice. This issue is devoted to a discussion of this revolution, for it will also be the chief topic at the 1965 convention of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod in Detroit from June 16 to 26. The convention theme is taken from our Lord's mission command "Even so send I you." The articles by Victor Bartling, Martin L. Kretzmann, and Roland Miller set out some of the basic theological principles for the mission task, while the articles by Carl A. Gaertner and William J. Danker, combined with the direct reports from men in the field, explore some of the practical sides of these words.

Two questions will present themselves to many readers of this issue. They will ask, first, "What is new and different about this mission revival?" and second, "How do denominational loyalties harmonize with current mission thinking?"

It appears to us that the new element in contemporary mission thought and practice does not lie in the fact that the tail is beginning to wag the dog. This has been one of the happy side effects of every mission revival in the church's history. Again and again the "home" church has been roused from complacency or has been forced to subject cherished views and practices to searching Biblical reexamination by developments in the "foreign" fields. Many a "domesticated" church body has been led to search its heart and to try its ways through the insights of foreign workers.

The new element in the contemporary mission revolution, as we see it, lies in the strong emphasis on the role which the individual believer must play in God's mission. "Even so send I *you*," said our Lord, and His finger points directly at each of us, like the finger of Uncle Sam in a famous recruitment poster for another army and a different war.

Dozens of books on the nature of the church and its mission task really turn out to be books on the call of each Christian to a place in God's mission. The plea one hears today is to warm and fire God's people, wherever they may be and whatever their secular vocation, so that they may function as those who have been chosen for the sake of those who are still wandering in spiritual darkness. All Christians are to be full-time heralds of the King who is coming again soon to draw down the curtains of time on the drama of life as we know it.

The traditional caste division between clergy and laity has been analyzed and has often been found to be more rigid than the prescriptive Biblical materials demand. (See Maynard Dorrow, "Church Ministry and Mission Fields," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXV [Sept. 1964], 455—469.)

This understanding of the call of each Christian to the mission, while not new to the mind of the church, has the important consequence today of focusing our attention on the real heart of the church's mission. The need of the church will not be met by

better organization or by bigger organizations in and of themselves. The real need of the church, once it has discovered anew that it is people and that its task is missions, is a growing number of individuals who have heard and answered the Lord's question, "What do you think of Me?"

People must search their hearts before answering, and when they do this they discover what they are by nature before God. This discovery of personal sin-filledness and spiritual bankruptcy leads to renewed and deepened appreciation of the inexpressible grace of God poured forth in His Son Jesus Christ. This daily existence under God's judgment and grace, this daily experience of bondage and deliverance, has always been the nuclear power for the church's mission.

This is the perennial and daily experience of the gift of life to take the place of our death. Martin Luther described the tension which results in great spiritual power in the following words:

What is more contradictory than to sense fear and horror before the wrath of God and at the same time to hope in His steadfast love? The first is hell, the second is heaven; and yet in the heart these two must be joined as closely as possible. Speculatively they can be joined very easily; but practically it is the most difficult thing in the world to join them together. . . ." (*Luther's Works*, XXVI [St. Louis: Concordia, 1963], pp. 339 f.)

He expressed the same key understanding of the church's need in another sentence when he described the person who could rightly divide Law and Gospel as truly deserving of the title of Doctor of Theology.

All who share this understanding of sin and grace are charged by God with personal responsibility to participate in Christ's mission to the world. "Even so send I you!"

The second question, "How do denominational loyalties harmonize with current mission thinking?" is not easily answered and certainly not lightly to be dismissed as irrelevant, either by those who wish to dissolve all denominational lines or by those who see their denomination as the real church. The question is specially pressing for The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, characterized as it is by a deeply imbedded devotion to the truth of Scripture and to the symbolical books which give systematic expression to this truth. (Cf. Oswald C. J. Hoffmann, "Missouri Lutherans and Ecumenical Concerns," *Christianity Today*, IX [Jan. 29, 1965], pp. 17 f.)

A casual reader of some of the articles in this issue might receive the impression that one or the other contributor is suggesting a blithe abandonment of such confessional and denominational allegiance, at least in the non-Western fields of the church's mission. This is not their intention.

Non-Western missionaries are caught in the middle of the quiet revolution, as well as in some very violent and bloody political, social, and cultural revolutions. Their concern is to muster the full power of God in the place where they are and to keep purely human ideas and preconceptions out of His way. As Carl A. Gaertner points out, they have discovered broad areas of theological agreement with other missionaries, which their sponsoring Stateside churches have not yet been able to discover or admit. Understandably, this discovery of agreement is particularly true of Lutheran workers from

various American and European churches, but it also crosses Lutheran confessional lines in many ways. The missionaries are determined that the church be itself where it is, rather than a possibly abortive copy of some American denomination, with its unique historically and culturally conditioned patterns and structures.

They are pleading, we would think, for the right to be the church and are hoping that their Stateside brothers will help them in this effort. To put the idea in other words, circumstances have forced them to look at the concept "denomination" primarily from the perspective of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, rather than from the opposite perspective which, over the years, has characterized so much American ecclesiological thinking. (See James W. Mayer, "The Church as the People of God United in the Word of God," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXIII [Nov. 1962], 658—669.)

We doubt that denominational alignments and confessional groupings are going to disappear under the impact of the current mission revival. We doubt that many sober non-Western workers are hoping for this to happen. It may well be that some denominations have outlived their usefulness in God's mission and should be absorbed or amalgamated. Others surely have not. They still have valuable theological and practical contributions to make as denominations. But as missionaries view themselves and the church where they are primarily in terms of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, as they see doors opening wide which seemingly only man can close to the Word of God, they become anxious to share their insights and their deep convictions with their brothers all over the world. Our hope is that this issue may help Western and non-Western Christians to understand each other more fully as together they rededicate themselves to being God's mission in a darkling world. H. T. M.