

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY



Vol. XL

Special Issue

No. 6 & 7

The Gospel and Its Freedom Today: A Foreword

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The proclamation of the gospel with its message of freedom in Christ Jesus is the compelling drive of the churchman's life. To say that the unifying principle of his life's work is the furtherance of the gospel is to say that he is conscious of the basic specification of his task. But it is saying more than that. It postulates a commitment, a conscious program, and the ability to carry out the task. It permeates the churchman's being and total personality, his dealings with his fellow servants, and his conscious evaluation of them and of self. Nothing less than that is meant, but even that is not enough. It extends to the relationships between himself and his God as a person, a steward, a servant, and a worker in the vineyard. In recognizing the central focus of the churchman's task, he guides his actions, programs, relationships, and commitments accordingly. This focus fashions his character and personality; it makes him by the grace of God a churchman worthy of the name.

The tribute here presented to Alfred O. Fuerbringer mirrors the concerns of this churchman. Appropriately they center in the gospel and its freedom for the world of today. The gospel is the theme which permeates the essays. It is evident not only in those which speak of gospel freedom or in those which directly interpret the Scriptures. It is illustrated from the Confessions,

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and church history supplies examples of it. An understanding of political science is contingent on it, and it enlightens the preacher's task. It is the core of the pastor's spiritual life. Missions would be impossible without it, and the social problems of today find their remedy through it. It must be communicated properly in the context of the culture of today. In interchurch relations it must be the touchstone. Without it the pastoral function of counseling would be poor indeed. The gospel is the essence of the theological task. The essays therefore are a fitting tribute to Fuerbringer's evangelical ministry.

Most of the writers of the essays are young men. These men speak with vigor and freshness, for they have experienced the gospel's liberation. They are from the take-over generation, yet they recognize that their world is desperately in need of the gospel. They have listened to "the good news for modern man." They tell it and apply it and use it for all sorts and conditions of men. They, too, want to leave it to be told and used and applied by those who will take over after them.

The writers postulate that man is at odds with God, that he is in a predicament, in an evil situation. This was taught by the teachers of the early church, who emphasized rewards and punishment apropos the problem of fate and necessity that occupied the Greek mind. St. Augustine and later the Council of Orange insisted on the total depravity of man. Luther, conscious of his

own mortality, saw the law as the revelation of God's wrath, destructive for sinners and false saints. Man is in bondage or under the lordship of the law, sin, and death, the rulers of this age. This bondage, alienation from God, "unfaith," is a factor with which the present-day preacher must reckon. ". . . unbelief and the ignoring or rejection of the Gospel are universal marks of contemporary man. . . ." Racism, poverty, and the nation's slums and ghettos show that all are guilt-laden before God and no class, not even the poor or the blacks, can be condemned more than others. "Human conditionality, changeability, and imperfection" condition political structures also in today's world. Man's rebellion and separation cause a state of tension for the individual, for he is in conflict with God.

Since man's rebellion causes a curse that alters man's relation to God and to the earth, the promise to Abraham is good news. A numerous seed and a land were the basic elements of the promises which Yahweh made to the patriarch, and that promise was a blessing that imparted life forces. "This promise to the patriarchs is understood as the power of Yahweh unto salvation for all who believe in him and his word." Abraham believed, as Paul affirms in his Letter to the Galatians. That faith was in the promise of life which was validated by the Christ event. The saving activity of God is carried out by Jesus Christ, making men members of the body of Christ, loosing them from fear, providing forgiveness of sins, relieving men's particular evil predicament. ". . . the gospel is and must always remain good news in particularity." The particularity of the present moment in history and the particularity of the individual's situation give

meaning to the gospel today, for the power of the gospel is dynamic to change and for change. "The gospel is good news of reconciled reconcilers and renewed men on a renewing mission."

In the Greco-Roman world, therefore, the gospel addressed itself to the questions of causation and free will, necessity and fate, and their relation to rewards and punishments in the afterlife. Astrological fatalism and determinism were a syndrome of thought that needed answer. Origen's attempt to answer them came out against the complete freedom of the will and on the side of a "transcendent, free, creating, loving God." Against Celsus the Christian apologete cited the empirical fact of the moral change in Christians, a betterment or improvement, a change from evil to good. That was not accomplished by the beliefs in free will and rewards and punishments. Origen asserted that "the power of Jesus brings about conversion and moral reformation in those who believe in God through him."

In the Middle Ages Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, and doctrinal controversies involving grace made ongoing appraisals of the gospel message necessary. Medieval institutions, such as the councils, monasticism, confession and absolution, had strong gospel accents. In absolution the priest-pastor pronounced God's forgiveness to the penitent sinners. Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Thomas Aquinas brought their learning to bear on the intent of the gospel and witnessed to its power. During the centuries of the later Medieval Period the Waldensians promoted the message of gospel grace despite some questionable teachings. Moreover, within the Western church the masses of

the people made hymnody with its gospel notes their own. The gospel and its freedom was present in the world of five hundred and more years ago as it is today in today's situations.

For the 16th century Luther discovered in the gospel the message of forgiveness of sins and justification by faith; its content, Jesus of Nazareth. In the Smalcald Articles he affirmed both the centrality and the ultimacy of the gospel. An examination of these articles reveals their relevance for the 20th century. "The entire thought world of the Reformation Era, it seems, focused in the great Scriptural theme of justification by faith. Under the Spirit this dimension of the gospel was discovered then; it is ours now, not to be lost."

This Luther who fastened on the doctrine of justification by faith also spoke about the two kingdoms. He thereby posed the question of the relationship between the gospel and political structures. He would have agreed with the warning that one ought to "become suspicious of every legalizing of the gospel." The service of the gospel does indeed include prayer, verbal and overt acts for the downtrodden, deprived, and despairing. In applying the gospel to social issues an eschatological accent is in order. Yet it is the application of the gospel to the here and now.

This is inherent in the freedom of the gospel, "God's freeing power for life." The gospel is God's answer to man's bondage. It proclaims the shape of God's love and the shape of the life in Jesus. In a direct application to servants of the Word we learn:

The gospel is God's answer to our past failures in our ministry to others because it convinces us of the forgiveness of sins.

The gospel is God's power that frees us for a prophetic ministry because it convinces us God judges in mercy and gives us His grace in Christ. The gospel is God's shape for our ministry because it reminds us we are to assume the form of servants to others.

The church's response, therefore, to the man-centered concerns of today's world is a new apprehension of its own call to servanthood. The Son of Man said of Himself, "I am among you as one who serves." Gospel service is gospel freedom.

As the gospel is Christ, so freedom is in Christ. "Freedom begins and ends in Christ as powerfully witnessed by his Spirit." Freedom entails a change of lordship, a new reality. No longer do sin, death, and the law have dominion. There is deliverance from the demonic power, from slavery to sin to slavery to righteousness. Freedom from the law, which tabulates and multiplies sin, is the liberty of the new life of sonship by baptism into Christ. The law leads to death, since it promotes sin. However, "man has hope beyond death, since in baptism he has already experienced the full hostility of death in Christ's death." In Christ he has the new life, sharing the life of the new age in Christ and in His Spirit. Called into this freedom, he is enslaved to righteousness. This freedom is "the voluntary slavery of love" and a servanthood that is the outcome of the Spirit's proclamation of the gospel.

The servant-task of the church is therefore also its mission-task. The gospel and mission go together. The *skandalon* of the gospel must reckon with indifference, man's anxieties, secularism, the upsurge of the major non-Christian religions, anthropocentrism — man. "The gospel of Jesus Christ

is good news for a world that has discovered man. The mission task of the church is to proclaim it." The gospel and its freedom is the message for 20th-century man.

For the church's mission, mass communicators are decisive. They are the media for the proclamation of *sôtêria* and *shalôm*, salvation and peace, to the community. The church studies the media of mass communications to use them in the best possible manner for the proclamation of the message which alone can sanctify the medium.

This message, too, sanctifies learning and culture. The mission and the servanthood of the church require of proclaimers of the message an understanding and appreciation of culture and its significance. Culture cannot give forgiveness and comfort, but the church speaks the gospel to man of modern culture. Again, modern man is beset by social problems of which the urban crisis is perhaps the most pressing. Success theology, found in many churches, is not the theology of the cross. Hence, in applying the gospel to the problems of racism and poverty, judgment of others is as much out of place as self-justification. The gospel is more than verbalization or talk in abstract terms. It calls for application to the problems discussed in today's editorials and news analyses. Such an understanding of the gospel is orthodox and catholic and open.

The application of the gospel to the social problems of the day is not "the social gospel." This is clear from the definition of the gospel. A clarification of terms is helpful, too, in defining the theological task of the church. It begins with an analysis of the situation of those to whom the

gospel is addressed. A relevant and meaningful presentation of the gospel speaks to the condition of the day; it is a spelling out of the implications of the gospel for all of life. It translates the creeds into meaningful formulations; this, too, is part of the theological task. That task has an ecumenical dimension.

Is that dimension ambiguous? If so, perhaps the shifting from a theological to an ecclesiological context sets ecumenism into a more meaningful frame of reference.

It [the ecumenical movement] now resides in the problem of the present and the future, of the sacred and the profane, of the life and death of the world itself—and the question is not whether one church or a multiplicity of denominations is a better witness to the gospel but whether civilization can even survive, or, to put it theologically, whether the gospel can break through the law of the future as fate.

Yet, the gospel message of reconciliation has been seen as compelling the unity of the churches, a reconciliation of each other because of a reconciliation with God. In the dialectics of law and gospel, it can be argued, the gospel has no independent structure but permeates all structures.

Perhaps there is one more dimension of the gospel that needs emphasis. What the Smalcald Articles call the "mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren" is the imparting of the gospel, comfort, the message of forgiveness. Pastoral counseling does all of that. However, the skills and understanding, patience, tact, and tested techniques of dealing with people will aid the pastor in his ministry to individuals and the direct application of the meaning of the gospel to the present prob-

lems of guilt-conscious individuals. That selfsame gospel is the motivating force for the pastor's own spiritual life. The private meditation in the pastor's hour of prayer strengthens him for the freedom of the ministry to others which is his.

That ministry to others is based on the gospel message of comfort and consolation, addressed primarily to the inner life,

and is perforce causative of spiritual freedom. But God's liberating deed in Christ extends not only to the soul but also to the body of the individual. It extends, too, beyond the self to society and the entire creation. Today to this world the gospel calls men to die and to be free, free for their neighbor in the liberated community of the people of God, the church.