

For the

# LIFE of the WORLD

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## For the **LIFE** of the **WORLD**

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**W**here in the world is the church? That's the first question that must be answered as we consider the role of the church in this world. Ignatius of Antioch (CA 110) simply answered: "Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia," "Where Christ is, there is the church." Looking for the church in the world? She's easy to find. She's where Christ is. And where is Christ? Ignatius answered that by stating, "Ubi episcopus, ibi Christus," "Where the bishop is, there is Christ." We Lutherans say much the same thing in a slightly different way, "in order that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel" (Augsburg Confession V). Note that, in locating the church, neither Ignatius nor the Augsburg Confession begins with, or even includes, the good



# The Church in the World

**By the Rev. Matthew Harrison**

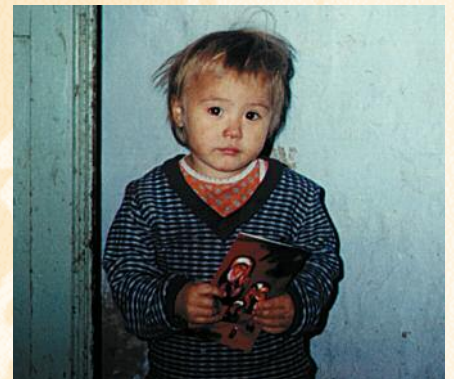
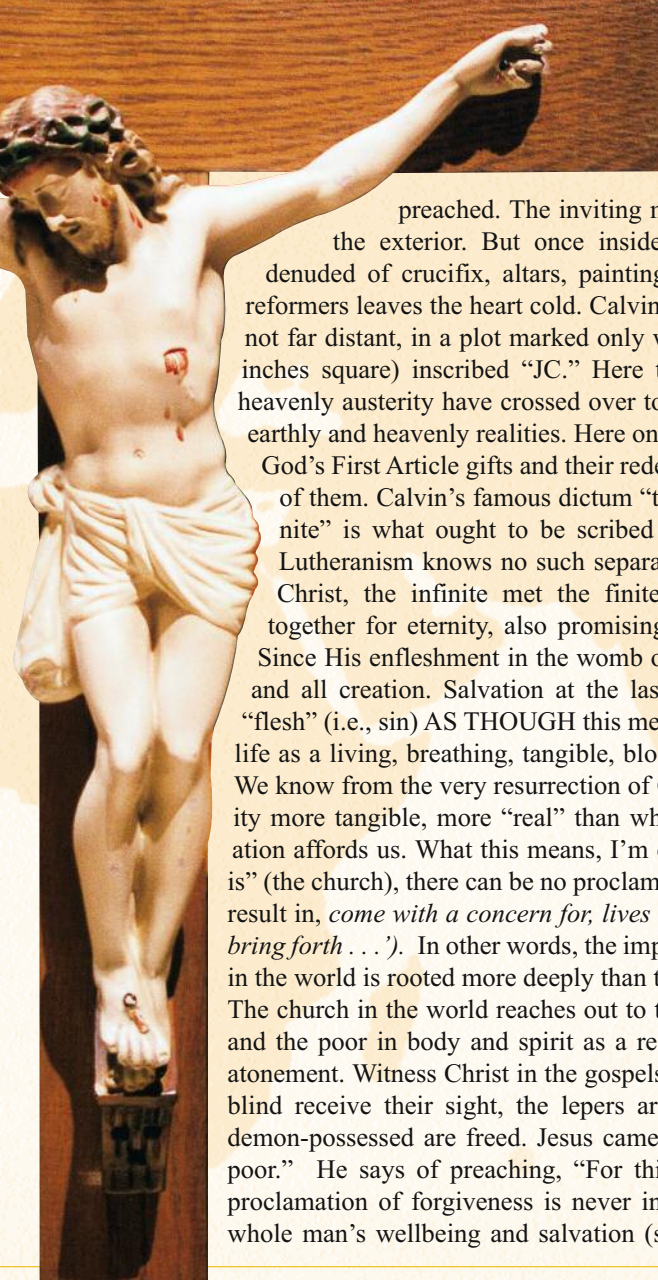


deeds of believers. Both begin with Christ (Word and Sacrament delivered by an office). And yet Article Six of the Augsburg Confession quickly follows: “Our churches also teach that this faith is bound to bring forth good fruits and that it is necessary to do the good works commanded by God.” It’s rather simple then: The church is where Christ is, and where Christ and the church are, there good deeds are going on. With this there can be no doubt of the primary focus of the church: the proclamation of the saving Gospel of Christ, and the administration of the Sacraments. But has the church no role in the world beyond this proclamation and administration? We confess that she does, and precisely for the sake of the Gospel.

“What” the church is to be doing in the world is answered by Christ, just as surely as the “where” of the church is located and answered in

Him. One need only peruse the gospels, beginning with John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” A recent trip took me to St. Peter’s Cathedral in Geneva, the church where John Calvin

preached. The inviting medieval structure beckons from the exterior. But once inside, the starkness of a sanctuary denuded of crucifix, altars, paintings, and statuary by the Geneva reformers leaves the heart cold. Calvin lays buried in the city cemetery not far distant, in a plot marked only with a small stone (not but eight inches square) inscribed “JC.” Here the intended earthly denial and heavenly austerity have crossed over to a denial of the fullness of both earthly and heavenly realities. Here one finds no celebration of life and God’s First Article gifts and their redemption in Christ, rather a denial of them. Calvin’s famous dictum “the finite is incapable of the infinite” is what ought to be scribed above the old cathedral doors. Lutheranism knows no such separation of earthly and heavenly. In Christ, the infinite met the finite and bound them inextricably together for eternity, also promising us such an enfleshed eternity. Since His enfleshment in the womb of Mary, Christ affirmed this life and all creation. Salvation at the last will be no elimination of the “flesh” (i.e., sin) AS THOUGH this meant the loss of the “fleshly” (i.e., life as a living, breathing, tangible, blood-filled, heart-beating reality). We know from the very resurrection of Christ that heaven will be a reality more tangible, more “real” than what this surreal sin-distorted creation affords us. What this means, I’m convinced, is that “where Christ is” (the church), there can be no proclamation of the Gospel that does not result in, *come with a concern for, lives here and now* (*faith is bound to bring forth . . .*). In other words, the impulse for the church’s good deeds in the world is rooted more deeply than the mandate of good deeds itself. The church in the world reaches out to the lost, the perishing, the weak, and the poor in body and spirit as a result of the very incarnation and atonement. Witness Christ in the gospels. Whenever Jesus shows up, the blind receive their sight, the lepers are cleansed, the lame walk, the demon-possessed are freed. Jesus came to “proclaim good news to the poor.” He says of preaching, “For this I came” (Mk. 1:38), yet this proclamation of forgiveness is never in isolation from concern for the whole man’s wellbeing and salvation (soul and body). The same Jesus



**The church in the world reaches out to the lost, the perishing, the weak, and the poor in body and spirit as a result of the very incarnation and atonement. Witness Christ in the gospels. Whenever Jesus shows up, the blind receive their sight, the lepers are cleansed, the lame walk, the demon-possessed are freed.**

who speaks so eloquently of the necessity of the sheep hearing the voice of the Shepherd for life eternal (John 10) proceeds to raise Lazarus from the dead. And this is recounted in the context of John's gospel, in which Jesus' favorite description of salvation is bodily resurrection (Jn. 6:40, 54; 11:24). Where Christ shows up in the gospels, heaven breaks out. Sin is forgiven. People are cured. We are offered in the healing accounts of the gospels a proleptic glimpse of heaven. True, it remained a proleptic glimpse then and remains that for us now.

If Christ today dwells in His church via His Gospel preached and Sacraments administered, can we deny that there is healing going on in the church today? Who of us would deny it? Who of us has not seen personally a remarkable turn of medical events in an individual for whom we prayed, to whom we administered the Sacrament? Yet, we must admit that in this mean time, all the glory of Christ lays veiled under the cross. Lazarus was raised, but he soon died a second death. Through the transgression of one man, all died. The wages of sin is death. None of us can escape the portal through which we must leave this life. So there's no point in putting "healing" or "wholeness" at the center of our theology. That would displace Christ and his cross. "Wholeness" remains secondary; always contingent upon the cross as Christ wills it for His purposes in this life, and fully only in the next.

And if Christ today dwells in His church, then, ought not, or how can the church not be a refuge for the poor, the hurting, and the sick? How can she not be the voice for those who have no voice? It is, to be sure, the responsibility of government, the left-hand kingdom, to see that the weak and vulnerable are cared for and protected, but what of those places where government has ceased to govern and protect the divinely-given dignity of individuals and orders of society? What of our inner cities where, under the weight of human sin, governmental neglect of its role as bearer of justice and insurer of marriage, has meant the return of "tohoov va vohoo" (chaos, Gen. 1). What of a culture of death that has apparently inextricably found its refuge under the "nose" of the "most Christian nation on earth"? If we believe in the incarnation of Christ and



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**If we believe in the incarnation of Christ and His fundamental affirmation of creation and life itself, if we believe in the atonement of Christ and the blood-bought value of every life, if we believe the gospels, we cannot but care for the ill, *be a voice* for the weak and oppressed, and so far as possible, be the means for the healing of the sick or caring for the orphan.**

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His fundamental affirmation of creation and life itself, if we believe in the atonement of Christ and the blood-bought value of every life, if we believe the gospels, we cannot but care for the ill, *be a voice* for the weak and oppressed, and so far as possible, be the means for the healing of the sick or caring for the orphan. Perhaps we'd rather "just preach the Gospel." We could do so indeed, and preach the full Gospel of full forgiveness in the cross of Christ. And God would, no doubt, continue to bring many to faith. But we'd be preaching the full Gospel of only half a Christ. And how much of our preaching would be heard as hollow, faith without love, a mere clanging cymbal (I Cor. 13)?

I propose nothing new. Our forebears organized orphanages, "pilgerhauses" for immigrants, hospitals, and retirement homes. Many of these institutions are still in existence—one of every three not-for-profit nursing home beds in this country is provided by a historically Lutheran institution. The challenges before us are enormous. The church cannot, shall not solve all that troubles ("The poor you shall always have with you . . ."). But shall we redouble efforts to love our neighbor, body and soul? If we are Christ's church, there is no question. For where there is Christ, there is the church. And, as the church bears witness to Christ's saving Gospel, she cannot but love the neighbor. The Gospel is full, complete, and perfect—our acts of love and mercy that flow from it are not. But then they, too, are proleptic, the clear indication that salvation is for the whole person for a flesh and blood eternity. *Augsburg Confession*, Articles 4, 5, and 6 form an unbroken whole as well.

*The Rev. Matthew Harrison is the Executive Director of the Board for Human Care Ministries of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.*