

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

The Christian Mission, a Look into the Future

R. PIERCE BEAVER

First Communion and Confirmation

BERTHOLD VON SCHENK

The Lutheran World Federation: From
Institution to Movement

ANDRE APPEL

Charisma in the New Testament and the
Apostolic Fathers

ARTHUR CARL PIEPKORN

Ministry Without Fear

KRISTER STENDAHL

Homiletics

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Editorial ✠

"Will the Real Missouri Synod Please Stand Up?"

Observers at the 1969 Denver convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod were puzzled by two contradictory actions taken by the delegates. On the one hand they declared pulpit and altar fellowship with The American Lutheran Church, and on the other hand they elected as president a man who had publicly declared himself against fellowship. We asked several historians and longtime leaders of the Synod to explain this curious contradiction. After an hour's discussion, they agreed that what had happened at Denver was characteristic of the Synod throughout its history and should not have been unexpected. They argued that the real Missouri had again reflected the diverse nature of her personality and the various theological and sociological elements that went into her makeup and created her character.

First. There is, for example, a long-standing difference in emphasis between those who understand faith as a relationship to God through Jesus Christ and those who understand it as the acceptance of a series of propositional statements about God. Friedrich A. Schmidt summarized the faith relationship in an essay delivered at the first Synodical Conference meeting in Milwaukee in 1872 and subsequently endorsed by both Walther and Pieper.

Therefore all other doctrines lose their significance if the doctrine of justification is not correct. It can be immaterial to us whether the essence of God is in three or six persons as long as we must fear Him as the God who is jealous toward sinners. Only when we know and believe that we poor sinners by grace through Christ are reconciled to God the Father and only through faith, which the Holy Ghost alone works, attain the righteousness that avails before God does the doctrine of the Holy Trinity become full of comfort and salvation.

Provided the person who stands in the pulpit keeps this article [justification] pure, provided his whole sermon is dominated by this thought that a person must be saved by Christ alone: if he then here or there lapses in form or expression, no harm is done; another, however, who does not live in this article, even though he preaches beautifully and correctly nevertheless does not bring his congregation true comfort or the necessary joy.

Again, Walther wrote:

If this article of our soul's salvation is grasped and held with firm and sure faith, then other doctrines like that of the Trinity gradually follow.

Walther's approach to theology and church relations received new emphasis in connection with the sesquicentennial celebration of his birth in 1961. This renewed emphasis appears in an article entitled "The Gospel Dominates Confessional Lutherans," by Lewis W. Spitz Sr. in *Affirm* (April 1971).

Second. At the second meeting of the Synodical Conference in Fort Wayne (1873), Wilhelm Sihler stressed the understanding of faith as the acceptance of a series of propositions when he introduced a thesis that read: "Also he who denies conclusions

properly derived from this confession is no true member of the Lutheran Church, even though he illegitimately holds the Lutheran name." The concern for theological propositions was strengthened by the arrival of some 200 Lutheran pastors from the Steeden pro-seminary of Friederich Brunn in Nassau, Germany. Brunn's students were not trained theologians; they came with very limited education ("One and all they came to me almost completely ignorant," said Brunn) and so "theological studies proper were not pursued; primary emphasis was put instead on learning the Catechism." The Brunn *Sendlinge* may also be responsible for the oft-expressed concern that theological propositions must not be changed.

Third. Another facet of Missouri's complex personality was shaped by pietism. It generated strong ecumenical interests, genuine concern for social welfare, and a strong emphasis on exegesis and Bible study, the latter often over the protests of systematicians. (The work of George Stoeckhardt in the Missouri Synod represents a dogmatic reaction to pietistic Bible study.) Negatively, pietism resulted in a rejection of the world as God's creation and in an almost Gnostic deprecation of material things. In some areas pietistic Bible study led to an almost superstitious reverence for the very words of Scripture.

Fourth. The Synod has always struggled within its own breast between true ecumenical concerns and a passion for pure doctrine that usually led to isolationism. Walther epitomized the former attitude when he wrote:

The more this [the rejection of Schmucker's Definite Platform, which, in effect, charged that there were errors in the Augustana] strengthens the faith and the courage of all true Lutherans here, the more compelling is the challenge therein contained to nurture with supreme faithfulness and greatest diligence the unity which God through His marvelous grace has already wrought amongst us. We, at least for our little part, feel it a sacred duty to add our little bit.

This ecumenical concern has reached several peaks in our history, notably in the 1920s, culminating in the formulation of the Chicago *Theses* (although these were rejected), and then gaining steam again in each of the following decades and climaxing finally in the Denver declaration of fellowship with The American Lutheran Church.

But the ecumenical concern has been almost evenly balanced by the concern for pure doctrine that produced an isolationist "We're big enough to go it alone" stance. This concern for pure doctrine led the Synod to turn down repeated pro-fellowship proposals from the Committee for Doctrinal unity. For a recent example of this strong concern for pure doctrine see the article by Walter A. Maier Jr. in *Affirm* (April 1971). In this article Maier suggests an interpretation of Romans 16:17 f. that represents the classic isolationist stance of the Synod.

Fifth. The Synod has always been torn between an evangelical and a legalistic stance. Thus in 1892 a teachers conference meeting in St. Louis, Mo., approved a paper that concluded that in the elementary schools Law should predominate over Gospel, as could be proved from (1) the Scripture, (2) the nature of the child, and (3) experience.

The evangelical character has also had its defenders, one of the most dramatic being

the group of 44 pastors who issued "A Statement" in 1945 (reprinted with commentary in the *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, XLIII [November 1970], 150—87) which deplored legalistic practices in the Synod that they had noticed.

Many other examples of the complex personality of the Synod could be cited. A strong dogmatic interest has often been in competition with an equally strong exegetical orientation. Low-church men and high-church men have managed to live together, despite heated and vigorous differences of opinion. Pro-school and anti-school men, intellectuals and anti-intellectuals, fundamentalists and nonfundamentalists: men with a surprising variety of theological positions call Missouri their Synod. The common denominator amidst all this variety is faith in Jesus Christ as Savor and Lord and a studied determination to perpetuate commitment to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

The real Missouri Synod has always been a blend of diverse theological views within an overarching confessional unity. One can quote valid historical precedent for a variety of positions. Recently there have been voices in the Synod that identify the "historic Missouri Synod position" with a strong demand that the Milwaukee convention rescind or suspend fellowship with the ALC, withdraw from LCUSA, deny the right to use historical-critical principles of Biblical study, and exercise Christian discipline against those whose instruction does not totally conform with their selection of the various *publicae doctrinae* that have been stressed in Missouri's history. If our historical survey has any validity, then the younger Walther would probably lead the floor fight against these demands. F. Bente would support Walther, for in his work on unity (*Was Steht der Vereinigung der lutherischen Synoden Amerikas im Wege?* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917], p. 110) he wrote that not even the Predestinarian Controversy, the "greatest obstacle to unity," should prevent Lutheran synods from achieving unity, especially in view of the then approaching 400th anniversary of the Reformation.

Perhaps each reader is now constructing various combinations of these attitudes to fit himself or to fit someone else. For our purposes we do not wish to identify any configuration of these patterns in any individuals, but rather to point to the genuine Lutheran pluralism within confessional unity, which has been the source of Missouri's strength and which must be preserved if Missouri is to begin to play a positive role in American and world Lutheranism. The important question to be asked at Milwaukee is not, Shall we rescind fellowship? but rather, How can the Synod use its resources so as to be faithful to its mission and to help shape the future of world Lutheranism in obedience to the Lord's great commission?

HERBERT T. MAYER

"R. Pierce Beaver — An Editorial Tribute"

This journal is privileged to carry in this issue a searching and timely article by R. Pierce Beaver, who retired this year from his chair of missions and from the chairmanship of the church history department at the University of Chicago Divinity School. As the acknowledged dean of professors of missions in the western hemisphere, he is well known by mission scholars and missionaries in Europe and around the globe.

For long years there had been no professor of missions at the University of Chicago.

Beaver's coming in 1955 was due to the insight and judgment of two young scholars, each of whom was to become dean of the Divinity School in his time: Joseph M. Kitagawa, the incumbent, and Jerald Brauer, his predecessor. Into this prestigious seat of liberal theological analysis and abstraction came a quiet man with passion in his missionary heart, a light in his trained historian's mind, and steel in his apostolic purpose. Withoutrodomontade theatricals of any kind, he won the regard of colleagues and students alike. Above all, he won respect for the Christian world mission. All evangelical Christians stand in his debt for championing the cause of the Christian world mission for 16 years in the way he did—and in the place he did.

"Mission is the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. I am learning to appreciate this more and more in recent months," Professor Beaver confessed in a departure from the text of this article, originally addressed to the Midwest Fellowship of Professors of Missions at Wheaton College, Ill., on April 2, 1971.

We appreciate his forthright diagnosis of the causes for the sudden collapse of missionary support in many quarters. "The crisis is the product of an abysmal decline in faith and concern."

"It is largely due to the fact that there seem to be so few Christians who give more than lip service to Christ as Lord, Savior, and the unique and decisive Word of God to men."

We appreciate Beaver's stress on the indispensable proclamation of the Gospel in words and, equally, his impatience with any either/or choice between the verbal Gospel and the service of deeds done in love and justice.

Professor Beaver is not dogmatically settling all questions before yielding his chair. He recognizes the difficulty of theologizing the relation between God's general revelation and His special, unique self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. While not all readers of this journal may agree with his wording of the questions in this area, many will echo his opinion that answers such as those of Karl Rahner do not satisfy.

His call for a new voluntarism in the Christian world mission in the spirit, if not the precise form of the historical mission societies, deserves the thoughtful consideration of every world mission supporter. The incorporation of world mission support and direction in denominational budgets leads to Beaver's searching critique:

. . . our [mission] boards were put into the straightjacket of denominational structure and budget, became administratively rigid, were subjected to the American business managerial principles and methods, and eventually deprived the local disciples and congregations of meaningful and conscious part in the sending operation. The whole thing became depersonalized. Now many members have been lost to the cause, alienated or discouraged.

American denominations have often exploited the fund-raising appeal of world mission and then spent much of the proceeds on themselves. Now many supporters have become too frustrated to try any longer. They are weary of their attempts to preserve special world mission offerings for the world mission instead of being sliced 57 ways to finance general denominational programs. Most members recognize that the entire denomina-

tional budget merits their basic help but many desire to go the second mile in special mission offerings. Any denomination that persists in frustrating direct, personalized world mission support by this practice will probably experience a downward fiscal spiral.

In the judgment of this writer Concordia Seminary resonates to many of Professor Beaver's accents. It shares his anxiety concerning the erosion of faith in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Savior. It appreciates his insistence that the Gospel must be witnessed in words and not merely by a Christian presence.

Concordia Seminary also offers opportunity for voluntarism to express itself. The school is, among other things, a valuable instrument for training overseas national church workers. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod will be well advised not to play Russian roulette with the international good name and the academic accreditation of one of the most valuable and strategic instruments it possesses for the Christian world mission.

Voluntary support for international students can be a source of rich satisfaction for world mission supporters. Numbers of nationals who did graduate work at Concordia are already at work training other national church workers in Asia and Africa. Others are studying at the seminary now. The advanced training of overseas leaders is of key importance in the Christian world mission today.

We shall receive more than we give. Their very presence will force us to differentiate between our Biblical faith and peripheral cultural accretions. The whole process should make better Lutherans of us all, causing us to concentrate on the heart of Christ's Gospel for the heart of His mission.

In preparing for examination by the fact finding committee investigating Concordia Seminary, the writer made extensive use of Walther's *Pastorale*. This manual of arms for the Lutheran preacher significantly defines pure preaching of the Word as proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Its very first paragraph stresses that pastoral theology is a God-given *habitus practicus* whose purpose is the salvation of people.

One who exalts another principle to the central role in his theology is not a Lutheran professional pastor. He may be a zealous amateur. Even though he may win great reputation among men for his supposed orthodoxy, in theology he would literally be an "ex-centric." Such "ex-centricity" can be very destructive to the salvation of people, which Walther says is the purpose of theology.

But it is easy to let "ex-centricities," true though they may be, polarize, politicize, pauperize, and paralyze us for the mission of God. A veteran New Guinea missionary recently commented on the abrupt and drastic slash in mission staff which shook the morale of both missionaries and national Christians:

We briefly share these concerns with you so that together we may work and pray for changes in our beloved Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Our leadership only reflects what we are or permit. Has our own concern been too narrow, too much centered on self, too much a protecting of a position and not a concern for people who are without Christ? Has our emphasis on particular doctrinal positions and a strong confessional stand been seen in terms of God's mission or our own? Has it aided in bringing men and women to know Jesus as Lord and Savior? When we view what is going on in our church at

home today, seeing the polarity, men fighting together rather than working together, demanding assent to preconceived positions and historic statements rather than to the Lord Jesus Christ, we wonder how long this church can stand. Isn't it about time that all of us began to put the needs of our neighbors, whether across the street or across the world, first? If we change, our congregation will change. If it changes, the whole Synod cannot but begin to change. We are to be engaged in the mission of God, a mission for others, a mission aimed at bringing men to know and love and follow Jesus to the glory of God. God help us to be faithful!

Denial of the Gospel is totally destructive. "Ex-centricity" away from the Gospel is always partially destructive. Arden Almquist in his balanced, evangelical presentation, *Missionary, Come Back!* (New York and Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1970), makes a point too seldom considered:

The fundamentalist rarely faces the fact that his presentation of the Gospel alienates substantial numbers of men from Christ just as it wins others. There is no way to measure this. We do not keep statistics of those who refuse the Gospel. We do not number those who find the Gospel irrelevant because our presentation has made it appear so. It is easy to suppose when the Gospel is refused that it is because of its intrinsic offense, of which the Scripture speaks, when in reality, the offense that turns the hearer aside may lie in the messenger or the vehicle of the message.

Shall we eternally destroy living people for whom Christ died in our efforts to maintain *our* political power or *our* particular theological systematization in the church?

Our introduction of Professor Beaver's essay has taken us farther than we had expected. But that's the way it is with him. He is a most stimulating person. However, the views we have expressed are our own and should not be laid to his charge where they may be ineptly expressed.

We wish Professor R. Pierce Beaver a gratifying retirement. We look forward to the fruits of his pen and his editorial work for which he may now have some additional leisure.

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