

# An Evaluation of the Term “Christ’s Ministry to the Whole Man”

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In recent book reviews in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* we culled for comment sentences like these: “Jesus called on man to repent and to believe the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins. At the same time, Jesus healed as part of the redemptive work He had come to do. The Gospels make plain that our Lord, in *His ministry to the whole man* (emphasis ours), was not exclusively a ‘soul saver,’ a ‘healer,’ or a ‘wonder worker’” (Vol. 65, No. 3, July 1968, page 220, “The Christian and Social Concerns”). “The church must reflect the concern of her Lord, who pointedly addressed Himself to the physical, social, economic, and political concerns of men. Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, condemned the artificial criteria by which social outcasts were produced, spoke of exploitation, of obsession with the material, and clarified the place and role of government” (Vol. 64, October 1967, page 318, “Emerging Shapes of the Church”). These are by no means isolated exceptions. One can read much of this nature in current theological periodicals and publications. It calls for examination and evaluation on our part in line with the injunction: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (I Thessalonians 5:21). This we shall endeavor to do.

References to Christ’s ministry to the whole man in contemporary Lutheran sources do not disregard His ministry that aimed at the salvation of the souls of men. To do so would involve a rejection of what He himself said about the purpose of His coming into the world: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” (John 3:14–17). “The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28).

Our Lord did, however, work many miracles. In some instances we are expressly told that He acted out of concern for the physical or emotional needs of those whom He helped. He introduced the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 by saying to His disciples: “I have compassion on the multitude, because they continue with me now three days, and have nothing to eat: and I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint in the way” (Matthew 15:32). In the case of the raising of the widow’s son at Nain we are told: “When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and said unto her, ‘Weep not’” (Luke 7:13).

The question which concerns us now is whether the miracles or acts of our Lord which showed His concern for the physical and emotional needs of men were a part of His ministry which was coordinated with His redemptive work, or whether they were subordinate to His redemptive work. The modern trend leans toward the former alternative.

If one of our Lord’s purposes in coming into this world had been to eliminate physical, emotional, and social ills, we would end up with a confusing picture of Him. It is true that He healed and helped many, but what about the rest? If He had the power to help, why did He not use this power in behalf of all who needed help? We may have an excuse for not helping in all of the cases of need that surround us in this ruined world because we lack the resources to reach everyone, but our Lord’s resources were unlimited.

But here we are operating with a rational argument. Our true arsenal is the Word. Here our Lord and His inspired writers direct us to the answer to the question whether His miracles were coordinate with or subordinate to His redemptive work. You recall the question which John the Baptist addressed to Jesus by way of two of his disciples when he had a hard time of it trying to reconcile the fact that Jesus is the Messiah with his being permitted to languish in prison: “Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?” (Matthew 11:3). Jesus answered: “Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the

gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me” (vv. 4–6). Here evidently our Lord did not want His miracles to be viewed as an independent or even coordinate part of His ministry, as though His were a ministry to the whole man, but rather as evidence for the fact that He is indeed the Messiah, the promised Savior.

When a certain nobleman begged Jesus to heal his sick son, there was a ring of holy impatience in Jesus’ reply: “Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe” (John 4:48). Here His longing rings through that men might reach a stage where they would believe in Him without first seeing signs and wonders. Evidently then signs and wonders would be expendable when men reached a stage where they were willing to believe His Word apart from signs and wonders, and were not an essential part of His ministry.

In John 10 we hear Jesus telling the unbelieving Jews: “If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works; that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him” (vv. 37,38). Again, the works are not an independent or coordinate part of His ministry, but a means to the end of bringing men to believe in Him as the One sent into the world by the Father to save the world.

The summarizing statement at the end of John’s Gospel establishes the same subordinate position in the ministry of Jesus of His miracles of mercy: “Many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (20:30,31).

We know that the parting commission of our ascending Lord was: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:15,16). What is that gospel, the attitude toward which determines salvation or damnation? Jesus himself explained when He on Easter evening opened the understanding of the disciples concerning the Scriptures: “It behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46, 47). Not a word about His ministry to the whole man. And so they preached: Peter on Pentecost: “Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 2:38); and Paul, the one born out of due season: “I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (I Corinthians 2:2).

Now this is not an academic question, which gives us an opportunity to exercise our theological wits. If it is true that Christ’s was not a ministry to the whole man and that His acts of mercy were not on the same level with His redemptive work, then to put it as though He was as much commissioned to take care of men’s physical and emotional ills as to redeem them from sin is false. History teaches us that once error is tolerated, it will in the end dominate. That, of course, is also written: “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (Gal. 5:9). We know what liberalism has made of Jesus—a model, a teacher, but the blood atonement has long since been abandoned. How do you suppose churches, which in spite of their heterodox character still once preached the fundamental truths about Jesus, got to where they are now? I’m sure that the answer to this question has been indicated: they began to put other phases of Jesus’ work on a par with His redemptive work, and eventually His redemptive work was crowded out altogether.

The emphasis upon Christ’s ministry to the whole man becomes a premise. The conclusion which is drawn was mentioned in the quotations with which we began: “The church must reflect the concern of her Lord, who pointedly addressed Himself to the physical, social, economic, and political concerns of men” (Vol. 64, p. 318). “In the footsteps of Christ, the church today proclaims the kingdom of God, by preaching and teaching, to be sure, but also by serving man in his total needs” (Vol. 65, p. 220). What compelling motivation! If Jesus dared to associate with publicans and sinners, the social outcasts of His day, His true followers must, to be worthy of their name, cast their lot with those who because of the color of their skin or the place where they live are the social outcasts of our day. If Jesus denounced the scribes and Pharisees because they devoured widows’ houses, His followers must denounce economic injustice. Because Jesus told men to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, the church today must also address itself to the political concerns of men.

But isn't the example of Jesus held up to us for emulation? One is here tempted to resort to a *reductio ad absurdum*. Jesus did address himself to the physical concerns of men. With a touch of His hand or a mere word He healed the sick, cleansed the lepers, raised the dead; in the act of distribution He turned five loaves and two fishes into a food supply adequate to feed 5000 men. Shall we then not say, "As His true follower, go and do thou likewise"?

The fact is that where Jesus is held up as an example for us, it is not so much in what He did as in the attitude that He showed. "Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26–28). His remarks after He had washed His disciples' feet are similar: "Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them" (John 13:12–17). So in Philippians 2 His obedience unto the death of the cross is held up as an example, not because what He did is to be repeated by His followers, but because of His complete unconcern for himself and His total concern for others: "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (vv. 4, 5). So in I Peter 3 it is His patience in suffering which is to be our example: "If, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously" (vv. 20–23).

We reject the concept of Christ's ministry to the whole man with its coordinated subdivisions of a ministry to man's spiritual, physical, emotional, economic, social, and political needs and call instead for upholding the concept of a ministry which had a single purpose, the saving of sinners from sin and damnation and making them heirs of eternal life, with all else subordinated under this one big purpose. And we consider it the unique call of those who believe in Him, that is, of His church, to work for the accomplishment of Christ's purpose by telling sinners of the completed salvation, which He had prepared for them.

Does this mean that we advocate indifference to the physical, social, economic, and political ills of men? God forbid. The divine imperative is too clear: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:39). Either this simple command or the many unfoldings of it in all parts of Scripture indicate clearly what is involved in total concern for our neighbor. But here we are dealing with Law, not with the Gospel. The more the attempt is made to enforce the demands of the Law by calling upon the example of Jesus, the more men are making of Him another lawgiver and diverting attention from His saving work which gave us the Gospel.

Here we bring a pertinent quotation from Luther:

It is an evil custom to treat the gospels and epistles as books of law, from which we should teach what men ought to do and present the works of Christ as nothing more than so many examples or illustrations... Beware of turning Christ into a Moses, as if He had nothing more for us than precept and example, like the other saints... You should interpret the word, work and suffering of Christ in the following two ways. First, as examples proposed to you for your imitation, as St. Peter shows, I Peter 2:21; so that when you see Him praying, fasting, or helping and showing love to men, you should do the same with respect to yourself and your neighbor. But that is the least important side of the Gospel and does not yet stamp it as Gospel; for in such works Christ is of no more use to you than any of the saints. His life stays with Him and profits you nothing. In short, this mode of preaching makes never a Christian, but only hypocrites. You must rise much higher than that, although this best sort of preaching has been practiced but little these many years. The chief and fundamental thing in the Gospel is this, that before you take Christ as your example, you recognize and accept Him as God's gift to you; so that when you see or hear Him

in any of His work or suffering, you do not doubt but believe that He, Christ Himself, with such work or suffering of His, is most truly your very own, whereon you may rely as confidently as if you had done that work or endured that suffering, nay, as if you were yourself that Christ. See, this is to understand aright the Gospel, that is, the infinite grace of God, which no prophet, apostle or angel could ever wholly express, or any heart sufficiently admire or comprehend. This is the mighty fire of God's love toward us, whereby He makes the conscience confident, joyful and content. This is to preach the Christian faith. This it is that makes our preaching a Gospel, viz., glad, good, comfortable tidings ... When you open this book of the Gospel and read or hear that Christ comes to this or that place, or that someone is brought to him, you are to understand this to mean the sermon or good news by which He comes to you or you are brought to Him. For the preaching of the Gospel is nothing else than Christ's coming to you or you being brought to Him. (M. Reu, *Homiletics*, pp. 61, 62, quoted, as he says, from Luther's dedication of the winter series of his *Church Postil* to Duke Albrecht of Mansfield, referring to the preaching of the Middle Ages.)

In this area of the third use of the Law we need to distinguish between direction and motivation. The Law supplies direction, but only the Gospel supplies proper motivation. As we behold how Jesus first loved us and gave himself for us, we shall love Him in turn. When we then ask what we can do to show our love for Him, the Law gives us welcome direction: "I delight in the law of God after the inward man" (Romans 7:22). Such motivation finds welcome guidance also in the unfolding of the meaning of the Law as our Lord Jesus has given it to us, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount, the parable of the Good Samaritan, or the description of the last judgment.

You will have noticed that in the quotations, which were adduced, the deduction is from the ministry of Christ to the whole man to the obligation of the church to minister to the whole man. This, in turn, is seen to mean involvement (an overworked word in our day), social action, community projects, protest demonstrations, lobbying, and the like. All of this obscures the fact that with respect to the world the church has the duty to preach the Gospel. And it leads to losing sight of the fact that the Lord has given the church only one means with which to accomplish its mission, the Word, and to resorting instead to the means which has been entrusted to the state, the sword; for no matter how mild coercion may be, it still involves force. The Christian individual does indeed participate in the affairs of the community and the state, but while his ideals are shaped by God's Word and he is motivated by the Gospel, he is then to be identified as operating in the secular realm and not as being engaged in the business of the church or using means which have been entrusted to the church.

The more the conclusion is drawn from what is called "Christ's ministry to the whole man" that it is the duty of the church to address itself to the spiritual, emotional, physical, social, and political needs of man, the more is grist being poured into the ecumenical mill. For then no longer is agreement in doctrine the common denominator requisite for unity and union. Rather, the total needs of the total society become the common concern, and since the means to meet these needs are mundane just as the needs are, they will be essentially the same. Then the demand to avoid duplication of effort becomes valid and cooperation and eventually merger the common sense approach. If, however, as is in fact the case, the spiritual needs of man are supreme and can be supplied only by the Gospel of Him who died that men might have everlasting life, then agreement in doctrine is of the essence before there can be cooperation or union, for false doctrine will always in some way distort the truth of which the Gospel is the center, and can undermine and destroy the saving faith.

We resent the implication in the conclusions drawn from references to Christ's ministry to the whole man that suddenly a new light has dawned as to what the church's business really is and that conversely it was because the church was not doing its business, the world is in the mess in which it is today. For Christians, concern for their neighbor's need is part of their sanctification, and while sanctification is never perfect, it is there. But what the individual Christian does to help in need, to comfort the sorrowing, or to advise the ignorant is not something that he records and about which he boasts. What individual Christians have done as citizens to bring about the inauguration, implementation, and support of various programs for the welfare and betterment

of man down through the centuries is also not a matter of record; nor what they have done to support various non-religious charities such as the American Red Cross and the endless agencies which approach them either through the mails or by personal solicitation.

The church has always shown a concern for the needs of its own. It is significant, however, that where something other than the preaching of the Gospel was involved, help was to a large extent restricted to those who through the Gospel had become part of the church. Note the quotations: "All that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need" (Acts 2:45). "Great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: ... distribution was made unto every man according as he had need" (Acts 4:33-35). "Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea" (Acts 11:29). "It hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem" (Romans 15:26). That doesn't mean that they had no heart for others. But they were aware of the concentric circles to which the Apostle points: "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10). What is significant is that in those early (and may we say purest?) days of the church there was no indication of a sense of a general obligation to society as a whole except the all-important one of telling all about their sin and their Savior. No "bread Christians" were produced in that way.

We have every reason for searching self-examination in these days when the love of many is growing cold. We need to be alert for opportunities to show our love for our Savior, opportunities revealed as such by the Word. But we need not cringe before every accusation of modern prophets when they accuse us of not becoming involved. We need to be doubly chary of the course which they chart when we find that it rests upon the premises of a shaky doctrinal foundation such as we have found in the term "Christ's ministry to the whole man."