

The Relevancy of the Church in the Modern World

[Delivered to the Arizona-California District Convention,
Tucson, Arizona, June 18-20, 1969]

by Carl H. Mischke

Introduction

Whether we personally like the word or not, it apparently is here to stay. The word "relevant," or one of its forms, has crept into our religious vocabulary with increasing frequency during the last decade or two. What does it really mean? A thing is said to be relevant when it fits or suits given requirements, when it is pertinent and applicable, when it has something worthwhile to say in a given situation at a given place and time.

The assignment of this paper, "The Relevancy of the Church in the Modern World", has obviously been prompted by the claims of many today that the Church is no longer relevant in our modern world. It may have been alright in its day, but today we know so many more things that we didn't know then. This, according to their claim, makes the Church obsolete.

The most vocal critics, many of which are Protestant ministers, have made statements such as these: "Five out of every six church buildings in America could be sold and dismantled without damage to the Christian mission." "The local church is no longer a satisfactory vehicle for doing the work of Christ." "The traditional work of the local parish is hardly likely to survive in an era of religious revolution." "The Christian ministry is doomed to disappear with the bourgeois culture that made room for it."

Some Protestant leaders have been urging that the traditional work of local churches be replaced by new types of ministries. They recommend ministries without churches, special ministries instead of pastoral ministries for clergymen, churches without buildings. Some seminaries are planning radically revised curricula to prepare students for these special ministries.

They are, apparently, reaping what, they have sown: The evidence lies in what is now happening in many theological seminaries. Many young theological students are extremely critical of the Church, even openly hostile to it. A professor in a leading Eastern seminary said recently that the most consistent characteristic of that student body is the degree in which the individual student hates the Church and its institutional apparatus.

We are told that the enrollment in these seminaries is declining. Those who enroll are not coming to prepare for the parish ministry. A survey of the graduates of one seminary during the last 25 years reveals that only 20 percent are in parish work of any kind. Most of the students in such a seminary now arrive with an open aversion for the parish ministry. Without firsthand experience or knowledge of the inside workings of a local pastorate, they complain of its drawbacks; small salary, long working hours, poor housing, outworn educational methods, ineffective pastoral work and preaching. And so they enter the institution designed to train them for their life's calling, not with enthusiasm and fascination, but with an attitude of anger and hostility. This cynical criticism of an institution by those preparing to serve it, to be its spokesmen and representatives, is indeed alarming.

In the process, these churches are actually ceasing to be the Church. They are recasting the Church's mission by becoming political agencies for a particular partisan viewpoint, by reducing their outlook to embrace only humanitarian concerns divorced from the power of a redemptive Gospel, by efforts to shift the main thrust of the Church from the spiritual to the secular, and by leading the Church away from the reformation of the individual to the reformation of society.

And it is to this area, especially, that we shall direct our attention in this paper. As far as the outward forms of the Church are concerned, its outward structure and organization, the various ministries that are needed to carry out its assignment - here the Lord of the Church has not bound us. He gives us a great deal of freedom and expects us to use our sanctified common sense. So we need not be surprised if the outward form and structure of the Church continues to undergo change, even as it has in the past.

But when we now speak of the work of the Church, the assignment that Christ has given it, its message, its mission of God, its *Missio Dei*, here the directive of our Lord suddenly becomes very restrictive and confining. And this is the area that we're talking about as we now ask the question, "Is the Church still relevant in the modern world?" Is the mission and message of the Church as entrusted to it by Christ still relevant in the modern world? Does it still fit man's requirements as they exist today? Is it still pertinent and applicable? Does it still have something worthwhile to say at this particular time and place in the history of mankind?

Review of the Scripture's Teachings on the Real Mission and Method of the Church

While it would hardly be necessary to do so for this audience, we shall, nevertheless, at this point, review briefly what the Scriptures teach concerning the mission and message of the Church.

St. Matthew summarizes that assignment very clearly and very simply when he writes in the closing chapter of his Gospel, "Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw Him, they worshipped Him: but some doubted. And Jesus came and spake unto them saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:16-20).

St. Luke, the Evangelist, concurs when he writes in the opening chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, "And, being assembled together with them, (Jesus) commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence. When they therefore were come together, they asked of Him saying, Lord, wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And He said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Father hath put in His own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:4-8).

Who can disregard the Savior's eloquent witness before Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight that I should not be delivered into the hands of the Jews; but now is my kingdom not from hence" (John 18:36).

And that assignment, that message, that mission has not changed, not even in the 20th century. The Church is still the temple of God, the Body of Christ, made up of those who are the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus, who believe that Jesus died for their sins and rose again for their justification. The Church does not belong to man, but to Christ. It is His possession, called to serve Him and to fulfill His purposes. To this Church God has assigned the responsibility of calling sinners to repentance, of proclaiming forgiveness through the cross of Christ, of encouraging individual believers in their Christian living. The purpose is to lead the elect of God through faith in Christ unto eternal salvation. And the only means God has given to the Church to carry out its assigned purpose is His Word as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. Only by preaching the Law and the Gospel, sin and grace, the wrath of God against sin and the mercy of God in Christ, will men be converted and made wise unto salvation.

As soon as the Church deviates from that assignment, from that message, from that mission, it will cease to be relevant, for it will no longer meet the basic needs of man in today's society or in any other. It will no longer be relevant when it fails to fulfill Christ's purposes, as when, for example, it becomes an agency for the defense and propagation of unbelief, when it denies basic doctrines of the Christian faith such as the verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, the Godhead of Jesus Christ, and justification by faith. It will no longer be relevant when it joins forces with social revolution, when it condones and champions rioting and lawlessness, when it becomes skeptical of the power of the Gospel to reform the individual and then attempts vainly to transform man by seeking to improve his environment.

The antonym of "relevant" is "obsolete", gone out of use, no longer serving any real function or purpose. We could very aptly refer to the Church as obsolete when she forgets her God-given mission and begins to dabble in all sorts of things which, as a Church, are not her concern. It is somewhat ironical that those who are

most radical in their judgments of the biblical Church and who are pioneers in attempting to involve the Church' in those matters which are none of her business, that these usually fail to realize that they themselves are the ones who are making the Church seem irrelevant and unnecessary.

The Apostle Paul described them well, however, when he wrote to Timothy: "You must realize that in the last days the times will be full of danger. Men will become utterly self-centered, greedy for money, full of big words. They will be proud and contemptuous, without any regard for what their parents taught them. They will be utterly lacking in gratitude, purity and normal human affections. They will be men of unscrupulous speech and have no control of themselves. They will be passionate and unprincipled, treacherous, self-willed and conceited, loving all the time what gives them pleasure instead of God, They will maintain a facade of religion, but their conduct will deny its validity. You must keep clear of people like this" (2 Tim. 3:1-51.)

The Church which Remains True to her God-given Assignment will Always be Relevant

But let us now see that the Church which remains true to her God-given message and mission, that proclaims Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of the world, that bears witness to man's sin and God's grace, that Church will always be relevant. It will have something pertinent to say to the needs of 20th century man, in fact, it alone can provide him with that which he perhaps needs more desperately than ever before.

The world which the Church is serving today is more educated - it knows more about more things than in any preceding era in the history of the Church and the world. Almost all of that education and training is being imparted in an atmosphere that suggests a lot of questions, but provides very few answers; an atmosphere in which there is a great deal of searching, but very little finding; an atmosphere in which the theories and assumptions and accepted facts of this moment may already be outmoded because of a new discovery that will be announced tomorrow; an atmosphere that lends itself very well to the question which a well-known scoffer asked some 20 centuries ago, "What is truth"? and thereby subtly suggesting that there are no absolute standards anymore, no fixed truths, no final authorities, that there is, in fact, no last word that can be spoken on anything.

And yet, the Christian message - the one that God has laid upon our conscience to share also with the modern world - this Christian message insists that there are areas of learning and wisdom and knowledge in which there are absolutes, in which there are fixed truths, in which there is a final authority and concerning which a last word can indeed be spoken. The Christian message insists that there is an ultimate in wisdom and knowledge, a knowledge beyond which there simply is no other, a knowledge that is not susceptible of further analysis, a knowledge that is fundamental and essential, a knowledge that is final, a knowledge that is indeed the last word on the subject so that there's nothing more to say.

The Scriptures tell us just that when Paul writes to the Colossians, "In Him (that is, in Christ) are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge". (Col. 2:3) "Christ is the center of the circle," Luther used to say, "and all the narratives of Holy Writ, if they be rightly viewed, will point to Christ." "And if I do not find Christ in my study, then my study has been in vain. For without His help all my labor is ineffectual, without His grace all wisdom is folly." In Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge - not a few, not some, not most, but all of them. There is no knowledge and wisdom of any kind worth having, apart from Christ. For the wisdom in Christ does more than suggest questions. It gives answers, answers where they really count.

At this point I would like to share a little story with you, one that I read somewhere many years ago, but one that's always stayed with me. It concerns a young man who had just been graduated from one of the nation's leading law schools. Very much thrilled at the prospect of beginning his career after many years of hard work and study, he was sharing some of his excitement and enthusiasm with a next-door neighbor, a longtime friend of the family.

"I've finally made it," he said. "I have, job with a leading law firm in the East. I begin working the first of July. Incidentally, I'll be one of the highest paid members of my class."

"I'm happy for you," the old neighbor replied, "I know that you always worked hard in school. I'm sure that you will now work equally hard in the legal profession. But what then?"

"I expect to gain some valuable experience with this firm," the young man continued. "My name will become known, and before long I'll be able to branch out on my own."

"And then?" his neighbor continued.

"Then I'm going to get married, raise a family, and with my income I'll certainly be able to give them many of the advantages I did not have."

"And then?"

"Well, the way I have it figured, I'll be able to retire at an early age. Then my wife and I will travel and do all the things we were too busy to do before."

"And then?"

"Well, I don't suppose I can expect to live forever. I suppose eventually, like every one else, I'll have to die".

"And then?"

And for the first time in this animated, somewhat one-sided conversation the brash young man with all the answers was suddenly quiet. For this question, the one that really mattered, he had no answer. A brilliant mind, with a vast store of every imaginable kind of knowledge, but the wisdom he had acquired did not pass the acid test when he was suddenly confronted with life's most vital question. "What's my hope, in what do I place my trust, what do I hang onto when I come to the end of the road, in that inevitable moment when God taps me on the shoulder and whispers, "Time's up!" And unless I have the answer to that question I haven't gotten past the ABC's and my degree isn't worth the paper it's written on.

Therefore, I submit that the Christian message is indeed relevant to modern man, because it gives him an answer in that inescapable moment when he needs it most, when suddenly all his know-how and the vast estate he has accumulated doesn't help him in the least because he's about to be placed in a box without pockets. But the Christian message gives him an answer to that all-important question, "What must I do to be saved?", an answer that is the final authority, an answer that is the last word, for it comes from the lips of our omniscient Lord who has said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me"(John 14:6).

But the charge has also been made that in the Church, especially in our circles, we preach in such a way that our people are actually less afraid to die than they are to stay right here and face life the way it really is. Maybe the charge is not altogether without foundation. Maybe we're so conscious of the fact that, although still in the world, we're not of the world, that as a result, from the comparative security and shelter of our parsonages and teacherages, we unintentionally and unwittingly speak and act as though the world were not real and as though its problems did not exist or concern us.

So what about the person, the restless youth perhaps, in whom the thought of leaving this world, well, nothing could be farther from his mind, He has a life to live first and he's anxious to get on with it. So what he wants to know is this: What can Christ do for me right here and now as I move through this world? In other words, is the wisdom and knowledge that is centered in Christ practical? Is it functional? Will it serve me in good stead, will it also help me to make a go of things this side of eternity? His question is fair enough and deserves an answer.

Again, the answer has to be an unqualified "Yes". In fact, it's the only wisdom that will make our lives successful and meaningful, abundant and triumphant right here and now. For only in Christ do we begin to realize that we're not blind creatures of fate, that our lives are not ruled by chance, that we're not just a little, insignificant fly on a dizzy universe, that we're not just helpless pawns on the world's giant chessboard moved about at will to satisfy the whims of a fickle deity. No, only in Christ do we realize that we're a prized possession of God. We must be! For think of what He paid to make us His own. Silver, perhaps, gold? Nothing that cheap. The lifeblood of His Son. That's what He paid to redeem us. That's how much we're worth to Him. And if He thinks that much of us, nothing, but nothing can really go wrong in our lives.

We are here reminded of the Apostle Paul's triumphant declaration in Romans Chapter 8: "If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:31,32).

Admittedly, there are many little details in our personal and individual lives whose meaning and purpose may not immediately be clear to us. But there is one fact that we always know beyond all possibility of doubt.

Above us, reigning in heaven, is a God who is for us. This is not some vague, non-descript deity, but a God of love. Not just a God of love in general, but a God Who demonstrated His love for us in a very tangible way, in a way that we can all understand, when He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all.

The logic of Holy Scripture is simply this - and you can't argue with it. If God has given us the Gift, surely He will also let us have the ribbons. If God has given His Son to die for us, to ransom us from the powers of Sin and Death, and to win us back to eternal fellowship with Him, then surely He will also find a way for us to surmount the minor tragedies of life. If He has done the greater thing, surely He will also do the lesser.

We are not dealing here with some theological abstraction, but with an eminently practical truth which has a vital bearing on the life of every man and every woman every hour of every day. Someone has put it this way: "To go through life without the assurance of God's love would be nothing but a ghastly nightmare. Who would want to get up in the morning and go to work, not knowing how God felt toward Him, not knowing if God in His holiness and righteousness had thrown him off forever? Who would want to slave at the office or sweat at the work bench or ironing board, or who would want to go to bed one more night, not knowing if the God into whose presence he may step before morning is a hateful monster or a merciful and loving Heavenly Father?"

"The Cross of Christ is the only basis, the only sure foundation of Christian hope. Indeed, it is the only ground for prevailing hope that God has given to man. For it is only in the cross of Christ that man can finally become convinced of God's mercy and His love. Where else can man turn for an authentic revelation of His love? The towering mountains and the billowing seas may tell us of His power. The sun and the moon and the rolling canopy of heaven may tell us of His wisdom. The test tube and the microscope may tell us of the marvelous secrets which He has tucked away in His material universe. But nowhere can we find incontrovertible evidence of His love - except in His own self-revelation through the Cross. It is there that we learn what God thinks of us, how He feels toward us, and what His intentions with us are."

The Church, then, which is true to her God-given mission and message not only provides a sure answer to life's most vital question, "What must I do to be saved?", but it also provides the wisdom which alone can give rhyme and reason to the events of man's life right here and now. The Church which is true to her God-given mission can give an answer to the men and women in the world who are searching for the meaning and purpose of their lives. It can give them an answer which is the ultimate, the last word. That answer is found in Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. The Church which faithfully proclaims Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of the world will be relevant also in our modern world. For amid the rapidly changing scenes of life it will assure 20th century man that there are still some absolute values that never change. It will let him hear a voice that does not merely test theories, explore possibilities - and thereby undermine faith and create doubt. But it will let him hear a voice which in the areas that really count, does not have to say, "I think" or "maybe you're right" or "It seems to me" or "Who cares" or "What difference does it make?" But it will be a voice that speaks with authority and sureness, because it can back up everything that it says with "Thus saith the Lord."

Wisdom's highest, noblest-treasure,
Jesus, lies concealed in Thee;
Grant that this may still the measure
Of my will and actions be,
Humility there and simplicity reigning,
In paths of true wisdom my steps ever training.
Oh, if I of Christ have this knowledge divine,
The fullness of heavenly wisdom is mine.
Naught have I, O Christ, to offer
Naught but Thee, my highest Good.
Naught have I, O Lord, to proffer
But Thy crimson-colored blood.

Thy death on the cross hath Death wholly defeated
And thereby my righteousness fully completed;
Salvation's white raiments I there did obtain,
And in them in glory with Thee I shall reign.
Therefore Thou alone, my Savior,
Shalt be All in all to me;
Search my heart and my behavior.
Root out all hypocrisy.
Restrain me from wand'ring on pathways unholy
And through all life's pilgrimage keep my heart lowly.
This one thing is needful, all others are vain;
I count all but loss that I Christ may obtain.
(HYMN 366: 5-7)

Reasons why we can be so Sure that the Church is Relevant Today: Sinful Man does not Change nor does our Merciful God

But there is also very plausible and logical proof for the statement that the Church which remains true to her God-given message and mission is relevant in the modern world, just as relevant as it was on the day that Christ entrusted that message to His Church, just as relevant as it was on the day some 450 years ago when an Augustinian monk fastened 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. And it will still be equally relevant on the day that our risen and ascended Lord returns in glory. The reason why we can make such a positive assertion is that it rests upon two basic premises, both of which are Scriptural. The first is that sinful man, left to himself and his own devices, does not change. And this could be terribly frustrating and depressing if it were not for the second basic premise, as true as it is Scriptural. This is the fact that a merciful and a gracious God does not change.

Let's begin with the first: Sinful man, left to himself and his own devices, does not change. The world, also the modern world in which you and I dwell, is living proof. Anyone who has eyes to see certainly has ample opportunity to observe sinful and sin-blinded man in action. High on the list of sinful man's achievements, if not at the very top, are the unresolved agonies of a Vietnam. (And we hasten to add that as a Church we do not claim to have the military or the political solution for this problem. God has not endowed His Church with that kind of wisdom. Her wisdom and her weapons are not carnal, but spiritual). We have an opportunity to observe sinful man in action in the area of demonstrations and counter-demonstrations for almost every cause imaginable, ranging all the way from so-called peaceful, nonviolent protest to outright violence, burning, looting, killing, in defiance of every divinely established principle of authority and obedience. We observe sinful man in action in the increasing moral decay just in that area where the breakdown takes its deadly toll most quickly - that of the home and the family. We observe sinful man in action in a society that gets its kicks in the weirdest and most morbid fashion. And anyone of us could augment this list considerably.

But the most alarming feature about all this is that we're fast becoming accustomed to it. We're beginning to accept these things as normal, natural human behavior. Though we all know, as someone has said, that the situation ethics of the widely-heralded new morality is really nothing but the old immorality, yet it's being defended, approved, sanctioned - and that even in places where one might dare to hope for better things. Today we no longer condemn rioting and looting and burning; instead we commend the remarkable restraint of the authorities. This is but one of many barometers which accurately reflects the moral climate of our day; and the reading is not a pretty one. And the still, small, timid voice that is raised in occasional protest and disapproval is quickly silenced. We are reminded that we must be careful not to violate or deprive anyone of his basic human and constitutional rights. As a result of our permissiveness, we're fast approaching a way of life in which we're concerned about the rights of everyone except those of the decent, honest, upright, moral, hard-working, thrifty, law-abiding citizen. He's losing them one by one and no one seems to care.

Shock us? It should! But surprise us? Not really? Do we actually have the right to expect anything better from man who long ago preferred the Tempter's voice to the voice of God? Do we have the right to expect anything better from a world in which the creature has consistently professed to be wiser than His Creator? Of course not! Didn't our God say long ago, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9)?

Permit me to read to you Paul's description of sinful man, left to himself and his own devices. The translation is that of the NEB, Romans 3:10-19.

There is no just man, not one;
No one who understands, no one who seeks God.
All have swerved aside, all alike have become debased;
There is no one to show kindness, no, not one.
Their throat is an open grave
They use their tongues for treachery,
Adder's venom is on their lips.
And their mouth is full of bitter curses.
Their feet hasten to shed blood,
Ruin and misery lie along their paths,
They are strangers to the high road of peace,
And reverence for God does not enter their thoughts.

Would anyone want to say that this is not a relevant analysis of modern man? Why, it could have been an editorial taken from this morning's newspaper commenting on something that happened in our modern world last night.

Paul also summarizes it this way: "There is no difference: for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:22,23). Natural man is not neutral at birth, as some would have us believe, so that his future development supposedly depends entirely on his subsequent environment. No, man is by birth and nature an enemy of God, inclined only to that which is evil. He is not even aware of his sorry plight, because he is spiritually blind. And even if he were aware of it, he would be powerless to do anything about it because he is dead in trespasses and sin.

No, sinful man has not changed. Left to himself, he is still the same selfish, self-centered individual that he has always been ever since the Fall. This makes the Christian message highly relevant. It does not presume to be able to change him by spending vast sums of money to alter his environment. It starts at the right place. It speaks to his foremost need. It goes directly to the heart of the matter by addressing itself to his heart, that heart which God describes as deceitful and desperately wicked. Because whatever hope man may have for a blessed eternity - if indeed he still believes in a life after death - and whatever dream he may have of a better life right here and now - this has to be the starting point - according to no less an authority than the time-tested, infallible, highly-relevant Word of an unchangeable God - that man must be taught to say, first of all, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." And only the Christian message has the power to get him to say that.

We have just made reference to an unchangeable God. And this is what saves us from despair. This is what renews our strength, our courage, our hope. This, above all else, makes the Christian message highly relevant - the fact that our gracious and merciful God never changes.

During the past year we have conducted and attended services, preached and heard sermons, wrote and read articles commemorating a historical event that took place 450 years ago. An attempt to correct a specific abuse within the Church caused God's servant, Martin Luther, to post his 95 Theses on October 31, 1517. That specific abuse was the sale of indulgences which offered certain spiritual and heavenly blessings in exchange for some earthly consideration, for something that man does, for something that a human offers God in place of true repentance and faith. An indulgence was a draft on the bank of heaven to pay for human sin. It was based on the underlying theory that Jesus and the saints had accumulated a surplus treasury of merits. Guilty sinners

who were in arrears could drag on the treasury - for a price, of course. The early and more moderate view was that an indulgence could remit only the punishment for sin which the Church had imposed. But in time a more extreme view developed which held that an indulgence could not only remit the penalties of the Church, but could actually forgive sin. And it was this specific abuse which provoked Luther's protest of 1517.

He said in part: "Our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, in saying, 'Repent ye' intended that the whole life of His believers should be repentance. Every Christian who truly repents of his sin has complete remission of all pain and guilt, and it is his without any letters of pardon. The true treasure of the Church is the holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God."

Through His Word the Holy Spirit had led Luther to see the glory and grace of God, to see that gracious God who never changes. For God, who first promised fallen man a Savior in Eden, has made good on His promise. That Savior has appeared in the person of God's own Son, Christ Jesus, and has redeemed man with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. The payment of this ransom, which fully satisfied the demands of divine justice, enables God to justify, to declare the guilty sinner righteous without any letters of pardon purchased with earthly coinage. It is his by faith.

Perhaps we have already wished that there might be some simpler word instead of the somewhat forbidding technical expression "justification". For its meaning is quite obviously not understood at all by the non-church going public and is cloudy, at best, even for many within the fold of the visible church. This is most unfortunate. For the thought which that word conveys is, in a sense, the pivot on which the entire Christian message turns. In reality the Bible was written to tell man that he is justified by faith, that God has declared him righteous, holy, unblameable, free from sin, because of the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus. The Bible was written to tell us that God now regards you and me and every guilty sinner - rich or poor, learned or unlearned, black or white or somewhere in between - as completely righteous in His sight, not because of anything that we have done, but because of what Christ has done for us. And what God has freely forgiven us in Christ, no one will ever dare to charge against us.

To illustrate the manner in which God forgives, to illustrate the fact that God does not change, that He is indeed the same gracious, merciful God - yesterday, today, tomorrow and forever - I like the analogy of the compassionate physician whose widow was going through some of his personal effects one day when she happened to find a number of statements for professional services, fully itemized. But at the bottom of each of them the good doctor had written, "Forgiven, too poor to pay." His widow, who had never quite approved the generosity of her late husband, even went to court in an attempt to collect them. The various itemized statements were introduced as evidence of an unpaid debt. The judge examined them carefully and asked, "Is this the handwriting and the signature of your late husband?" She testified that it was. "Then, my good lady, the judge continued, "there isn't a court in the land that has the right to collect them. For the man to whom they were owed has marked them, 'Paid in full'".

This is what God has written under the staggering debt of human sin and guilt that you and I owed Him, "Forgiven, too poor to pay." And there isn't a soul in heaven or earth or hell itself that will ever dare to charge against us what God has forgiven us once and for all in Christ. For the gracious, never-changing God to whom our debt was owed has marked it "Paid in full." And this declaration of God's unmerited grace in Christ is a part of that infallible record of which a changeless God has said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35).

We shall now attempt to point out why this message of the grace of God in Christ is highly relevant in today's world. Today the accent is on human dignity, on the need for every man to receive his God-given and constitutional rights. Men of all races and walks of life are intent upon shaking off the shackles of discrimination and unequal opportunity that allegedly have plagued people in the past. Man wants to be truly free. But you and I know that there is no true freedom apart from Christ. You can put every man in a mansion, but without Christ he will still be a slave. The angry young man, the rebel and the non-conformist are not really free. They keep on searching, but that elusive goal of inner peace and freedom is always gone before they get there. The reason, of course, is that true peace and freedom comes only to those who accept the invitation of Jesus to put on His yoke, a yoke that He promises is easy and not burdensome. Perhaps even you and I forget at

times that the Christian message is not only a way of faith; it is also a way of life. Something happens to the man who really understands what forgiveness through Christ means. He becomes a new creature. In Him God performs a heart transplant of the highest order. God gives him a new life, a new purpose, a new incentive for living, a new power to live by, new tastes, new appetites, new everything.

Let's hear from an authority on the subject, Paul, writing to the Philippians: "Every advantage that I had gained I considered lost for Christ's sake. Yes, and I look upon everything as loss compared with the overwhelming gain of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For His sake I did in actual fact suffer the loss of everything, but I considered it useless rubbish compared with being able to win Christ. For now my place is in Him, and I am not dependent upon any of the self-achieved righteousness of the Law. God has given me that genuine righteousness which comes from faith in Christ. How changed are my ambitions? Now I long to know Christ and the power shown by His resurrection. Now I long to share His sufferings, even to die as He died, so that I may perhaps attain, as He did the resurrection from the dead. Yet, my brothers I do not consider myself to have arrived spiritually, nor do I consider myself already perfect. But I keep going on, grasping ever more firmly that purpose for which Christ Jesus grasped me. My brothers, I do not consider myself to have fully grasped it even now. But I do concentrate on this: I leave the past behind and with hands outstretched to whatever lies ahead I go straight for the goal - my reward, the honor of my high calling by God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:7-14).

How changed were his ambitions? You almost forget that this is the same man who once found his greatest delight in persecuting and killing Christians. But now he was a new creature, a man with a new allegiance. Now he was no longer a servant of sin, but a servant of God. And this was a willing and a joyful service. Here was a man who could truthfully sing, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, I'm free at last." And he was living the new life in Christ, not because he felt that he had to, but because he wanted to: The love of Christ constrained him.

Forgive me if I now feel constrained to use yet another little anecdote. But I'm a firm believer that an apt illustration or two will be remembered long after everything else the preacher said is forgotten. During the early days of the past century a wealthy plantation owner in the South was attracted by the heart-rending sobs of a young slave girl who was about to step up to the auction block. Moved by a momentary impulse of generosity he bought her at a very high price and then disappeared mysteriously into the crowd that thronged the marketplace. When the auction was over, the clerk came to the sobbing girl and handed her the bill of sale. But to her amazement on that piece of paper, which normally would have delivered her to her purchaser as his rightful possession, he had written a little four-letter word: F R E E - Free? At first she stood there stunned and speechless as one by one the other slaves were claimed by their owners and led away. What kind of a cruel hoax was this? When the impact of that word finally got through to her, when she finally realized what it really meant, she threw herself at the feet of the clerk and pleaded, "Where is the man that bought me? Please, you've got to help me find him. This man has set me free. I must serve him the rest of my life."

And you and I can only echo: "Christ has set me free. I must serve Him the rest of my life." This freedom in Christ now becomes the motivating power in the life of the believer, the power which prompts his every thought, desire, word, and deed. The love of Christ constrains him. This is a freedom of the highest order. He lives as he lives, because he wants to out of loving gratitude to Christ who gave His all for him. This makes the Christian highly relevant. In fact, it's one of the few things that is still relevant to our modern world. For the willing slave of Christ it now becomes a way of life which daily draws strength and power from the cross of our crucified and risen Redeemer. And he takes his place beside the Apostle Paul and declares by word and deed to a world that cannot possibly understand him, to a world in which he must truly seem a misfit and an oddball, he affirms with Paul: "The life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). He is free at last.

Voices from Outside our Circles which are Convinced that when the Church is not Relevant to the World it is its own Fault

Most of what we hear and read on this subject today is still extremely negative, that is, it supports the contention that the Christian is no longer relevant to our modern world, that it no longer suits the needs of 20th century man, that it no longer teaches anything pertinent and worthwhile to say at this particular time and place in the history of mankind.

Typical of this school of thought is an article title "On Being A Contemporary Christian" which appeared in Time Magazine as recently as two months ago. The writer states: "It is not really surprising that the churches should be sounding uncertain trumpets, or that Christians should be insecure as to the meaning and direction of their spiritual commitment. Undeniably, one of the most telling events of modern history has been a revolution which is the relationship of religion to Western civilization. The churchgoer could once take comfort in the fact that he belonged to what was essentially a Christian society, in which the existence of an omnipotent God was the focus of ultimate meaning. No such security exists today, in a secular-minded culture that suggests the eclipse rather than the presence of God.

"Science and technology have long since made it unnecessary to posit a creative Deity as a hypothesis to explain anything in the universe. From Marxists, existentialists, and assorted humanists has come the persistent message that the idea of God is an intellectual bogey that prevents man from claiming his mature heritage of freedom. In the United States, which probably has a higher percentage of regular churchgoers than any other nation on earth, the impact of organized Christianity appears to be on the wane. One problem for the future of the churches is the indifference and even hostility toward them on the part of the young. Even those drawn to the person of Christ chafe against outmoded rules, irrelevant sermons, dogmas that apparently have no personal meaning to a generation struggling to understand themselves, to grapple with such concrete issues as sex and social injustice."

While such talk is still quite representative of the majority opinion, we are gradually beginning to hear more voices from outside of our own immediate circle from people who are firmly convinced that if the Church has indeed lost her relevance in the modern world, the Church has no one to blame but herself. For when the Church ceases to be relevant it is only because the Church has departed from the real mission and message which Christ has entrusted to her.

I first became aware of this refreshing change in an article that appeared in the Reader's Digest about two years ago. It was written by a Mr. J. Hoard Pew, chairman of the board of Sun Oil Company, past president of the Board of Trustees of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. He has also served as chairman of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. He is an elder in his local church at Ardmore, Pennsylvania. These are rather impressive credentials, both in the Church and the business world, so we are apparently not dealing with a religious crackpot, but a knowledgeable individual who knows his way around. Many of his comments might well have appeared in the Northwestern Lutheran. Many of them are the kind that might well prompt us to comment, "I wish I'd said that."

He says: "I worry when leaders of the Church show signs of jeopardizing its power and influence by taking it away from its main mission. To be specific: As an active churchman for more than 40 years, I am convinced that many of the Church's top leaders today - especially in what are called the 'mainstream' denominations - are sorely failing its members in too ways: 1) by succumbing to a creeping tendency to downgrade the Bible as the infallible Word of God, and 2) by efforts to shift the Church's main thrust from the spiritual to the secular. The two, I believe, are related.

"The strength of the Church in the past has been its reliance upon the Bible as the basis of ultimate, eternal truth. The Scriptures have been accepted as the one changeless guide to faith, morals, and life. If there is one thing that modern man needs more than anything else, psychologists are agreed, it is fixed stars to guide him. Modern man has too few such fixed stars. The philosophy of our day makes all truth relative. Standards, values, ethics, morals, these, we are told, are subject to change according to the customs of the times.

"The effect of that kind of thinking has been devastating to the morals of our times. I'm convinced that much of the jittery, uncertain mood of youth today is traceable to the lack of something firm and unchangeable

to stand upon. As one brilliant but confused young man said to me recently, 'The trouble is, we're being asked to play the game of life without any stable ground rules.'

"The decay of belief in standards has not only infected the highest echelons of our social and political life; it has also infected important sectors of the Church. Studies made at leading schools of religion reveal that belief in unchanging moral laws has largely given way to the view that all guidelines are irrelevant, that is, a fixed moral code must go. In other words, decisions must come from man's sense of what the moment demands. This is called situation ethics, meaning that instead of applying eternal moral principles to a situation, we let each situation determine the principle.

"In my own denomination (Presbyterian) a special committee was charged with writing a brief contemporary statement of faith. The committee draft of a proposed confession replaced the ancient Westminster Confession's strong assertion of the Bible's 'infallible truth and divine authority' with a description of the Bible as a 'witness' to Christ as the incarnate Word, and a fallible one at that, since its thought forms reflect views which were then current and therefore require literary and historical scholarship as well as future scientific development to separate the true from the false. (It hardly needs to be said that we have heard strangely similar language also in some Lutheran circles).

"It is no secret that such uncertain theology has penetrated many leading schools of divinity. With seminary emphasis what it is today, it is not surprising that Biblical preaching in many churches has declined. Like most laymen, I go to church to hear heralded the mind of Christ, not the mind of man. I want to hear expounded the timeless truth contained in the Scriptures, the kind of preaching that gets its power from 'Thus saith the Lord'. Such preaching is hard to find these days. This may well explain the curious fact, revealed by latest church statistics, as well as a Gallup poll, that while church membership is showing a steady rise, church attendance is steadily dropping.

"Another thing I've noted during long years on denominational and interdenominational boards and commissions is this: Whenever any official church body relegates the Bible and its teachings to a lesser place in its program, it almost always turns to activity in non-church fields to fill the vacuum. Thus we see church leadership everywhere expending vast time and energy to push the Church into fields far outside its God-ordained jurisdiction.

"Evangelism, traditionally interpreted as the means used to bring men and women to Christ and the Church, has been given a completely new definition. Contemporary evangelism is now moving away from winning souls one by one to the evangelism of the structures of society. Or, as another modern churchman puts it: 'The heart of Christianity is not concern for the soul but concern for the world.'

"In an attempt to express this new concern the Church's modern evangelists, without any notable competence in either statecraft or economics, are leaping headlong into such fundamentally secular concerns as federal aid to education, civil rights, urban renewal, the nation's foreign policy, the admission of Red China to the United Nations, disarmament, higher minimum wages, forcible union membership, etc.

"No one would seriously deny that the individual Christian must relate his conscience to the problems of the secular society of which he is a part. It is plainly his duty as a citizen to express his Christian convictions in economic, social and political affairs. Likewise, no one would deny the pulpit's right to speak out on civil issues where moral and spiritual principles are clearly involved. (But even here the pastor had better exercise extreme caution, lest he confuse his personal predilections with the will of the Almighty).

"However, action to correct existing ills in the secular society should be taken through secular organizations, which can supply skilled leadership and techniques to do the job. To commit the Church, as a corporate body, to controversial positions on which its members differ sharply is to divide the Church into warring camps, stirring dissension in the one place where spiritual unity should prevail. 'When I joined the Church,' wrote one layman from Park Ridge, Illinois, 'I stated my faith in Jesus Christ as my personal Savior. I was not asked to subscribe to any special political, economic or social view.'

"Also less than pleased these days by the Church's overwhelming preoccupation with civil affairs are America's law-makers and civil authorities. I have file full of letters expressing resentment over church pressures. Says one: 'Separation between Church and State is a principle deeply embedded in our tradition. Yet

church leaders who would raise the loudest outcry if government attempted to interfere in any way with church matters see nothing contradictory in maintaining Washington lobbies and trying to dictate to Congress the kind of legislation which should be enacted on almost every conceivable economic, social, and political subject.'

"From another distinguished senator came this: 'I have been particularly distressed by the actions of many of our clergy and other church leaders who justify their violation of federal, state and local laws on the grounds that these are bad laws and that the only way to correct them is to break them. Once it has been stated that any law need not be obeyed unless it is a *good* law, the beginning of and end to rule by law has been initiated.'

"By what Scriptural authority does the modern Christian Church make this turnabout from its ancient mission? Christ Himself made a clear distinction between the concerns of temporal and spiritual natures. He refused to enmesh Himself or His followers in the economic, social and political problems of His day, problems certainly as serious as those we face today. When the Pharisees sought to entangle Him in politics, asking Him whether they should pay taxes to Rome, Jesus gave the classic answer: 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.'

"At no time did He countenance civil disobedience or promote political pressure either to correct social evils or to advance His spiritual mission. His highest priority was given to measures for changing the hearts of men and women, knowing full well that changed men and women would in time change society.

"To me, the Church is the hope - perhaps the only hope - of the world. If it proclaims the Bread of Life it will so affect society that many of our prevalent social ills will disappear. But it would certainly be ironic if the Church, grown skeptical about God's power to redeem society by transforming human nature, were to fall into the same ideological error as Communism and attempt to transform man by altering his environment."

You will have noticed that the preceding remarks were those of a concerned layman. In almost every major denomination today laymen are showing more and more concern over the lessening of emphasis on the spiritual nature and message of the Church. Many of them are becoming restive about some of the programs they are being asked to support. Many feel that their leaders are promoting activities outside the province of the Church, placing primary emphasis on secondary things, and seeking to reform society without the redemption of the individual.

Here are some of the reasons for concern cited by many laymen:

- a) The preaching they too often hear, stressing some form of social action or activity without a corresponding emphasis on the redemptive work of Christ at the personal level;
- b) The institutional church's participation in pronouncements on almost any subject, its taking of positions on controversial matters without either the mandate or the competence to do so;
- c) A growing tendency to enlist the political and economic power of the federal government on behalf of schemes dear to church leaders that, almost without exception, point straight to the concepts of a socialistic state despite the ever-increasing evidence of the failure of socialism wherever practiced;
- d) A shift in emphasis from the individual to society as a whole, though the primary aim of the Gospel is to reach individual persons, and through them the social structure;
- e) A shift in emphasis from distinctively Christian programs to basically humanistic ones (there seems more concern that surroundings of the Prodigal, and his personal comfort, shall be improved rather than that he shall be called back to His Father in penitence and restitution);
- f) A new and false interpretation of "evangelism" in terms of social engineering and revolution rather than proclamation of the redeeming love and grace of God in the person and work of His Son;
- g) A preoccupation with this world and its ills without a corresponding concern for the souls of sinners who desperately need the Savior;
- h) A failure of many church leaders to take the Bible seriously, with the result that they are tossed to and fro on the seas of human speculation without the anchor of a clear "Thus saith the Lord."
- i) The implicit redefining of the good and proper word "ecumenical" to mean "organizational".

These are some of the encouraging signs that more and more people are gradually beginning to believe that maybe the Christian message is not so irrelevant after all, that maybe the only hope of the world - and it doesn't take a very keen observer to note that the world's sorry plight is becoming, more desperate by the hour - is the transforming power of Jesus Christ, that maybe the Church had better quit crowding out Christ through its programs of social engineering and get started again in the task of winning individuals to Christ and through that redeemed individual to change society.

And this is where you and I fit into the picture. In these past few hours we haven't heard anything new, something we did not know before. By God's grace - and we cannot emphasize this too strongly - this is what we have always believed. By God's grace we still have His word in its truth and purity. By God's grace we still believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the world's only hope. We recognize how much it means to us. We surely appreciate its blessings. We surely want it preserved for and taught to our children. Yet how uninterested, how indifferent, how amazingly unconcerned we can suddenly become when it comes to telling the world about it. Certainly we talk about Christ - or do we? We pray for the success of mission work. We contribute for it. But do we do it with a real sense of urgency, not as though our Lord were returning in glory tomorrow, but as though he were coming today? Do we regard our assignment to preach the Gospel to every creature as the life and death matter that it really is? How little - how very little it sometimes takes to divert us from the King's business so that we're more than busy with the mundane affairs of our own little lives.

The history of our Synod these past few years - with the doors of unprecedented opportunity that God is opening to us - would seem to indicate that God may indeed have a real *Missio Dei* in mind for us, one much greater in its scope than we had ever dreamed of. If this is so, it's by grace, by grace, grace free and boundless. And that mission of God is obviously not to pound the pavement in a futile attempt to solve our social and political ills, not to advocate civil disobedience or even non-violent protest against those laws with which we may happen to disagree on the basis of personal judgment. God has given us a much more powerful weapon than this. He has given into our hands the Sword of the Spirit - His Almighty Word. Armed with that Word let's really get busy and tell the world that we have a message that is still relevant in 1968 - a message that is relevant because it alone can answer man's basic question, "What must I do to be saved?", a message that is relevant because it alone is able to provide the wisdom that will make our lives purposeful and meaningful right here and now. And that message will always be relevant, not only because man is still the same selfish, self-centered creature that he has always been ever since the Fall - but, above all, because we have a gracious God who does not change. For where sin abounds, there His grace, His mercy, His goodness abounds even more.

May God continue His grace to us so that we hang on to that message for dear life. Because that's what's at stake - life, here in time, and hereafter in eternity.