

Serving the Whole Man

[Presented to the Florida Pastor-Delegate Conference, September 23, 1970,
Redeemer Lutheran Church, Merritt Island, Florida]

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Serving the Whole Man

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It would seem that in the history of the church, just as is true in all of history, there is from time to time a shifting of emphasis concerning basic attitudes and goals in life. The study of church history points to the fact that the church has indeed gone through a number of different phases or periods. Beginning with the church of the apostles, the development of the church is traced through the period of the apostolic fathers where the emphasis was on the formulization of doctrine. During the next period, the outstanding characteristic of the church was its preoccupation with the ascetic life with its hermits and the beginning of monasticism. Closely following this, came the period of the church’s outward glory—the power of the papacy, the crusades and the building of the great cathedrals. This brings us to the time of Luther where the emphasis once again shifted to the proclamation of the Gospel and the simple preaching of the truth of God’s Word, and it could be said that at this point the church had come full cycle.

There is a saying well known to all of us that history repeats itself, and it is entirely possible, as we look back over those early periods of the church’s history, that we might come to the conclusion that we find ourselves now in the process of such a repetition. It would seem, from the religious periodicals that we read and religious sections of our newspapers and magazines and from a close observation of the practices in the church at large, that we are, at the moment, at the dawning or perhaps in the midst of such a shifting of emphasis concerning the church, its work and its very life. This shift is evident in the lack of concern for doctrine and actual changes of doctrine which are easily recognized in practically all the major bodies in the church, but it is even more evident in matters of practice. In connection with this shift, time after time, one hears the expression, “serving the whole man,” which is the theme for this paper. One gets the impression that herein lies the emphasis for the church today; that this is the slogan for Christianity for the 1970’s.

It is evident from reading our church periodicals and talking to the individual pastors of our Wisconsin Synod, that we really do not consider ourselves to have a part in this shifting of emphasis, and it is therefore taken for granted that we do not consider such a shifting to be wise or necessary. However, before we pass judgement on anything in the church or count ourselves out of anything that goes on in the church, it is always wise to stop and take a good close look at whatever the phenomenon might be and at ourselves in relation to it and how it will affect the church at large.

This paper does not presuppose to answer all the questions nor to be the final word on the question of “serving the whole man.” Its aim is not so much to propose nor to judge but rather to provoke your interest and concern and some honest-to-goodness thought in the matter.

The material for this paper is gathered largely from various conference papers and self studies originating in the “Board for Social Ministry of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.” Various other sources were also consulted, but in those conference papers and self studies, we find an excellent example and definite instances of what happens when such a policy as “serving the whole man” is undertaken in the church.

Let us proceed by asking ourselves first of all, what we are actually dealing with in this slogan or phenomenon of “serving the whole man,” second, the direction that such service can and does take, and finally, let us consider the conclusions which can be drawn for ourselves.

Just the fact that, as is mentioned above, so much is made of “serving the whole man” in the church today, we are forced to ask ourselves, first of all, “what does the phrase mean—what has caused the phenomenon to appear within the church today?” There are three possible reasons why such a shift of emphasis might take place: 1) either the church at large is experiencing an inability to make the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, 2) such a shift is dictated by contemporary consciousness, or 3) there is an honest awakening to “life in Christ.”

Walther, in his *Law and Gospel*, lists preaching first of good works and of grace later as the fourth perversion of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, and herein lies the possible problem today. It is rather interesting to go through the Scriptures with this particular point in mind and find that each and every time good works are mentioned, such mention is preceded by a setting forth of the faith from which these works come. The proper sequence of preaching is Law, then Gospel, and then sanctification. Every confirmand memorizes Ephesians 2:8 and 9, “For by grace are ye saved through faith and that not of ourselves. It is a gift of God not of works lest any man should boast.” Many a confirmand is also aware of the fact that that passage is followed by the words of Ephesians 2:10, “For we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” This sequence of passages points out, and in the correct order, that we are, to begin with, Christians solely by the grace of God, then that we as Christians, are the workmanship of God, and our purpose in life is to carry out the good works which God has before set up for us to carry out. What most of us do not remember is that in the verses immediately preceding the eighth verse, St. Paul reminds those present-day Christians who now lived their life with and for Christ, that there was a time in the past when they “walked according to the course of this world” and had their way of life “in the lusts of the flesh” and were “by nature children of wrath.” Thus before the beautiful Gospel passage and the mention of the sanctified life, which comes as a result of the Gospel dwelling within, came the preaching of the Law.

The definite possibility appears that what has happened today is that “serving the whole man” means social gospel, and what social gospel actually means is that all too often, if not entirely, the Gospel is preached without the use of the Law first. I cite a practical example; mission work in the inner city is often done in this way—food and clothing and physical necessities are supplied to those in want in the name of Christianity, but the recipients are not given the benefit of the knowledge that they also need Christ or why. Because of this, the recipients never realize that, if in no other way, they are like the givers in the fact that they too are sinful and need a Savior. Therefore the recipients are not only robbed of the saving knowledge of Christ but often are not the least bit appreciative of the help given because they cannot understand the love from which it comes.

The second possibility goes hand in hand with the first. The shift which we are seeing, which actually amounts to social gospel, is claimed by those doing the shifting to be something dictated by contemporary

consciousness. We are told, for instance, that our people today, and especially young people, are more Christian in many respects than their elders. Those who make this claim point to the fact that supposedly our children are much less materialistic than we are; they seek peace whereas our generation has fought war after war; their slogan is peace and love, whereas our generation is still in the industrial pursuit of death. In this argument, there is a basic flaw. One cannot be Christian without having accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior. One cannot accept Jesus Christ unless he realizes his sinfulness. Morality does not necessarily mean Christianity, and the morality which is pointed to today is often nothing more than an attempt to meet the demands of the natural law written in man's heart at creation. Contemporary consciousness is simply not what it is made up to be. Although the younger generation espouses peace and love and humanity toward all mankind, at the same time, they abuse their own bodies and commit more horrible crimes of murder and rape and physical abuse than any other generation known to man. What is needed is not a shift away from but rather a shift toward a simple preaching of Law and Gospel; of sin and for forgiveness in the Savior Jesus Christ.

The third possibility is the one that, if a shift does take place, we would hope is the basis for the shift, and that is an honest awakening to "life in Christ."

Samuel H. Miller, dean of the Harvard Divinity School, in the preface to his Lyman Beecher lectures, says,

Preaching which assumes that proclamation is all that is necessary, disregarding the nature of contemporary consciousness, I think is too facile and too arrogant to commend itself as more than an ecclesiastical presumption. The work of God continues in the mind and heart of modern man, and until we respect with honesty and perceptiveness the changes that are wrought there, we shall walk the treadmill of old clichés. The answers required of us simply cannot be stolen from our ancestors.

It is true, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the Christian church in the past, and this is most certainly true of the Lutheran church, has had its shortcomings in the realm of sanctification. For instance, the history of our own synod points to a definite lack of mission work up until the past five or ten years. As Christians grow, they are to mature, and that maturity is to show in their lives which is what Luther means by "a new man should daily come forth and arise and live before God in righteousness and purity forever." It is this shortcoming in the realm of sanctification that is so definitely stressed as the reason for the shift toward "serving the whole man." Consider for instance the following quotes:

A recent English version of the New Testament in II Timothy 3:16 and 17 makes an ancient, divine truth come to life with the simple statement: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching... so that the man of God may be fully qualified and equipped to do *every* kind of good work." However, your church and mine, not by design but by the imperative of its needs in its primitive history, did not always seek to qualify and equip the man and woman of God for *every* kind of good work—it was primarily concerned with the "good work above all works," the preaching and teaching of the Gospel, the verbalizing of the redemptive work of Christ."¹

It is in this area that the church has been guilty of some colossal blunders—in an effort to shield its youth from the stark realities of the world outside its middle—class churches, youth has literally been robbed of opportunities for growth, of opportunities for service in total ministry. Adults also need to reassess their ministry in the light of St. James' blunt statement: "Do not fool yourselves by just listening to his word. Instead, put it into practice." (James 1:22) This warning may help the man and woman of God to some really sacrificial giving up of self-oriented interests, pleasures, and goals and help to equip them to achieve the objective the Lord has established in this Word: "As often as we have

¹ Rev. Eugene C. Gunther, "Equipped for Every Good Work: the Congregation's Social Ministry," p. 103.

the chance we should do good to everyone but especially to those who belong to our family in the faith.”²

Sometimes this concern is most certainly overdone, in fact, we might violently disagree with it, as in the following: “A parish, whose membership has been sensitized to and is concerned primarily with ‘soul needs,’ moves contrary to the will of God. ‘Indifference to the realm of the social is a practical denial of the Christian faith.’”³ As I said, we might disagree with it, however, there is definitely a grain of truth within it, and it is with that grain that we must deal. Luther himself is quoted as saying, “This is the mark by which we shall certainly know whether the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ is effective in us: If we take upon ourselves the need of our neighbor.” There is always the danger that our practice does not back our preaching even when the doctrine in that preaching may be sound. Consider the words of Rev. John Heuss of Trinity Parish, New York City:

It is customary for all of us to lay the blame for public indifference to religion at the door of secularism and the materialism of our age. It is my personal opinion that neither of these does as much harm as does the constant parade of trivialities which the typical church program offers to the public. This program is only rarely related to the real issues which are clawing the soul of modern man to shreds. The program speaks with no commanding voice to the multitudes perishing for lack of certainty. This program gives the distinct impression that it is concerned only with its own self-preservation. But what most parishes are doing is so prosaic and so little related to anything except their own hand to mouth existence that the public cannot imagine in what way they can possibly influence the great affairs of the world.

We definitely do have to always beware so that our actions do not become like those in the tragedy recorded in the parable of the good Samaritan, where the priest and Levite, representing the church, passed by on the other side. (Luke 10:31-32) In this connection, I would suggest that you read the one pamphlet entitled “Our Ministry of Mercy.” It is without a doubt an excellent argument for social ministry.

If indeed, the shift toward mankind’s physical needs is one that comes as love welling forth as a result of a full understanding and appreciation for God’s love for us, then it is well founded, and we should not only learn to live with it but also move with it. However, recognizing what the Scriptures say concerning the heart of man, one has to have an honest doubt in his mind as to whether the time can ever come when the visible church reaches such a plateau of realization of God’s love. The Scriptures say, “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” This is true of the human part of all of us even when the Holy Ghost has moved us to faith. Christ comes and lives within us, but in moments of weakness, what St. Paul says is still true, “The good that I would I do not, but the evil that I would not that I do.”

The possibility is very great that “serving the whole man” as a phenomenon cannot be traced to any of the above reasons but rather to a little bit of each one. The proper distinction between Law and Gospel has certainly been shaded if not lost in many sections of the church. We are going through a very difficult period, especially here in our nation, as far as contemporary morals and consciousness is concerned, and there can be no doubt that within the church there are definitely some who have matured into an appreciation of what it means to “live in Christ.”

But perhaps, before reaching final conclusions, we should take a look at the directions that “serving the whole man” can and does take. There are three basic directions that “serving the whole man” seems to take. For lack of a better way to designate them, let us call them: 1) the most desirable 2) the borderline causes and 3) mistakes.

The more desirable causes are those which have been the concern of the church for a greater period of its history. One thinks immediately of the care of the mentally retarded, which has been for many years considered, in the Lutheran church here in America at least, as being part of the church’s business. Such people

² Ibid., pp. 108 and 109.

³ Ibid., p. 105.

require special care if they are to learn even the basic truths of God's Word, and therefore we have special programs and special institutions where this care, together with the precious Word, can be given.

Another very general category is helping the poor. Our Lord Jesus did most of His work among the poor and the halt and the maim and the blind. In the early apostolic church, the seven deacons (Acts 6) were chosen primarily to care for the physical needs of the widows and orphans. St. Paul, himself, advised and took up a collection for the believers in Jerusalem when they were caught up in the midst of a famine. The care of the poor in our midst and of the poor in general always has been and must continue to be part of the church's work.

Something which has not received a great amount of stress is serving the aging. Within the past several years, there have been valid attempts made by many congregations in many areas to construct homes and hospital care centers for the aging. However, there is a great deal that needs to be done in this field, especially with the ever lowering age of retirement, in order that the elder members of the church may not be lost in regard to their talent and experience. The Word of God has the answer for people of all ages, and this includes the aging, especially as is pointed out in the following:

Not too long ago a world-famous novelist gave testimony of what religion and faith have meant to him in the days of lengthening shadows. It is quoted here as an indication of what the ministry of the Gospel can be expected to accomplish. "If I were to give a reason for my fidelity to Christ in the evening of my life, I would call it His quieting of the radical anguish that is in me, the tragedy implied in the fact of being a man, that is to say, a creature condemned to death and who lives under a stay of execution for an unknown length of time."⁴

You will be interested in at least glancing through the paper entitled, "The Church, a Resource for Retirement." One runs across statements like, "the agings' inherent rights as creatures of God" and our "God-given responsibility toward the aging." You will also note with interest the listing of those inherent rights, but in general many good suggestions can be found concerning the aging and how to help them and involve them in the church's work.

It is possible that you might think of other desirable causes, but let us move on to what we consider to be borderline cases. These include involvement in the poverty programs; including ourselves in any program where there is government intervention; the matter of open housing; and the general subject of civil rights. The causes themselves are not the question. There is no doubt that there is a certain amount of inequity as far as wealth is concerned in our nation, especially when we consider the amount of overall wealth that we have. When one reads Acts 17:26-27, there can really be no great argument about the fact that one man has the right to live next to another regardless of his race or color. God did make, "of one blood all nations for to dwell upon the face of the earth." If we were indeed all Christians, the matter of civil rights would not be a question but a fact. But as St. Paul says, "all men are not Christian." The government does give many opportunities today, especially to Christian schools—opportunities which are very tempting. In all of the cases we mentioned above, we as individual Christians have a right and a duty as citizens of our nation to make our voices and our vote heard, but whether or not and how far the church is to move into these areas is questionable. What usually happens is that it becomes a matter of personal judgement and individual conscience, and this in itself poses a danger since one man's conscience does not necessarily dictate the same as another man's conscience. Thus, in the pursuit of causes which could conceivably be covered under the heading of Christian love, offense is often given, and offense is something which Christ Himself points out, we must at all cost avoid.

In addition to the offense which might be given, I might also mention that in the course of considering the material, especially the self studies of the Board of Social Ministry and World Relief of the Missouri Synod, the general impression that I got was this: that too much time and too much personnel and too much money is spent in the machinery of such programs. For instance, concerning the district boards for social ministry which

⁴ Rev. Eugene C. Gunther, "The Church, a Resource for Retirement," January 27, 1970, p. 11.

the Missouri Synod now has, the entire budget seemed to go to travel expenses, housing expense, meals, equipment, secretarial help and postage. What actual results come from all this time and effort is questionable.

Finally, there are the mistakes. "Serving the whole man" has caused some to espouse civil disobedience. The names Martin Luther King and Father Groppi are well known throughout America together with a host of other names. Civil disobedience, regardless of what the cause espoused, on the basis of Romans 13:1-5 is a matter of disobeying the authority that God has placed over us. When we thus disobey, we are disobeying Him, and the consequences must be as St. Paul says, "and they that resist shall receive damnation to themselves."

What are the conclusions that we can draw then? First of all, let us not kid ourselves. We are already, to some extent, involved in "serving the whole man." We support the care of the mentally retarded, we have agencies for the care of unwed mothers and illegitimate and unwanted children. Here in Florida we are contemplating building and administering facilities to serve the aging.

There are congregations within the synod who are making use of government subsidies in order to support the busing of their school children and to serve hot lunches and to fill the shelves of their libraries with books. We have special boards and committees in Synod whose duty is to see to it that help is forthcoming for those who need it whether they be former pastors and teachers or members of our congregations or just people in general who have faced disaster. We are already involved in "serving the whole man," and truthfully, it should be so because, understood in the right way, "serving the whole man" is part of Christianity. The Scripture tells us "look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others."

The quality of the life which our fellow man lives is something which definitely must be our concern. It must be our concern because his quality of life will determine to some extent the length of his life as well as how he lives it. When we consider the fact that life is the time of grace that God gives every man, life, whether it be our own or someone else's, becomes something precious.

The trouble is the problematical "fine line." There is, as there always seems to be in anything that we as Christians are faced with here in life, a fine line which determines just how far we can go. The primary concern of the church is to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In order to bring others to Christ, we must tell them first of all that they are sinners. There is always this danger, first of all, that when the church goes into the business of serving the physical needs of people, it is either too busy or finds itself too personally involved to point out the fact of sin and therefore truthfully is not able to offer the Gospel either.

The second danger is that involvement in social causes often times involves us in polarization. We are forced to take sides, and in doing so we find the ears of those on the other side closed entirely to whatever it is we might have to say.

The third danger is that in establishing such a thing as a board for social ministry, one finds a church developing within a church. We come across terms like the "theology of social ministry," and one is forced to wonder if this is different from the rest of Christian theology, and if not, what exactly is meant.

It would seem that the truth of the matter is this: that "serving the whole man," when used by the church in the correct meaning of the term, is the overall love and care that each individual pastor and congregation takes for its people, and if we as pastors and consecrated laymen are willing to do the work that God has laid before us, to show forth the love that dwells in our hearts as a result of His love for us, and to take the time—that precious item which is always the necessary ingredient, then special boards and committees will not be necessary. And then, the only shift that will be noticeable in the church will be the shifting into high gear in the carrying out of the overall work which God has given us to do.

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