

"THE CONGREGATION IN ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE COMMUNITY"

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"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Romans 12:21

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason of the hope that you have." 1 Peter 3:15

"You are the light of the world, A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:14-16

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Sometimes when a paper is assigned there is a particular reason for the paper. Perhaps there is a controversy about the subject. Perhaps here is a subject that has important practical implications. Perhaps here is a subject that points to weaknesses among us - a subject therefore which should be discussed.

When this paper was assigned no reason was given for it. As I prepared for this paper I concluded that all the possible reasons mentioned above could have been given for this particular topic. In discussing this topic I ask these three questions: I. Is there an unclarity as far as Scripture is concerned on this matter? II. What is the duty of a congregation in its community? III. What are areas that need attention?

I.

Is there an unclarity as far as Scripture is concerned on this matter?

Congregations come in all different sizes. They can be as distinct and different from one another as individual fingerprints. The congregation in Philippi seems to have had as a congregation the same kind of mission zeal that one of its first members, Lydia, had. The congregation calls forth the praise and thanks of Paul. The congregation at Laodicea calls forth the Lord's urgent warning, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm - neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of my mouth." Revelation 3:15-16.

Has God assigned a task to the Christian congregation? Has He made that task clear? Is there an unclarity as far as Scripture is concerned on this matter?

When one hears the differing views expressed one conclusion could be that perhaps the Scripture is not clear here. Experience has shown that that is rarely the problem when there are differing teachings on a matter.

Washington Gladden (1836-1918) of the Congregational Church and often called the father of the social gospel speaks for a great many today when he wrote in his article on "Philanthropy in America" for the New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, "True philanthropy is not merely remedial. It seeks to discover and remove the causes of misery. And the Christian Church has, for society as for the individual, not only a message of redemption, but also a message of regeneration....its most important work, after all, is to give us a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness."¹ A New York Methodist minister quoted by Prof. W. A. Schuetze stated this goal, "We will make our towns and our cities the right kind of places so that everybody will be a Christian as a matter of course. When it used to be hard to be good, it will become difficult to be bad."²

We have grown to expect that The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church in America will issue statements on current political and social issues.

Since the appearance of the Mission Affirmations of 1965 in the Missouri Synod articles speaking of the church's duty to take part in social action have appeared there also.

Compare with this the very clear words of the Augsburg Confession, Art. XXVIII: "But this is their opinion, that the power of the Keys.... is a power or commandment of God to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer Sacraments. For with this commandment Christ sends forth His Apostles, John 20:21sq.: As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you. Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained. Mark 16:15: Go, preach the Gospel to every creature.

"This power is exercised only by teaching or preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments....

"..The power of the Church has its own commission, to teach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments. Let it not break into the office of another; let it not transfer the kingdoms of this world; let it not abrogate the laws of civil rulers; let it not abolish lawful obedience; let it not interfere with judgments concerning civil ordinances or contracts; let it not prescribe laws to civil rulers concerning the form of the Commonwealth. As Christ says, John 18:36: My kingdom is not of this world; also Luke 12:14: Who made Me a judge or a divider over you? Paul also says, Phil. 3:20: Our citizenship is in heaven; 2 Cor. 10:4: The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the casting down of imaginations."

Is there an unclarity of Scripture on this matter? No. Professor Armin W. Schuetze can successfully issue the challenge, "We find no imperatives assigning to the church a role in social action." He may furthermore assert, "Jesus' kingdom was not of this world and did not direct itself toward correcting the structures of society," and "The church's only prophetic mission to those outside the fellowship of faith is a call to repentance, exposing sin and its consequences through the law and proclaiming forgiveness through the gospel. This is its God-given mission to the whole of society."³

Professor Irwin Habeck as he discusses the popular term, "Christ's Ministry to The Whole Man," can insist, "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."⁴

II.

What is the duty of a congregation in its community?

To answer our question we must not look to the Old Testament prophets as they spoke to the situation of a theocracy. We must look to the New Testament and the example of Jesus and His New Testament church. You need not be at all discriminating when you consider Matthew 28:18-20 and Mark 16:15-16. "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the

name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you, and surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.'" "He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.'" In each case you have the full command. The same is true of Jesus' words in Luke 24:46-48, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

If what the churches insist upon today amounted to truly following the command and example of Jesus, then the words of Jesus at His trial could not have been so. Then the accusations of the Sanhedrin or something very close to that should have been true. But Pilate recognized that Jesus' kingdom was not of this world.

Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders provides no surprises, "Therefore I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood...Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified." Acts 20:26-28,32. Paul can summarize his ministry among the Corinthians in this way, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

The charge which is given in a pastoral call interprets Christ's command to His congregations:

- "To preach the Gospel of our Lord among us in its truth and purity, and to administer the Sacraments in accordance with the inspired Word of God and the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, as laid down in the Book of Concord of 1580, and to establish and maintain sound Lutheran practice at all times;
- "To discharge toward all the members of our congregation(s) the functions of a pastor, that is, to watch over their souls in an evangelical manner (Acts 20:28), in particular, to visit the sick and dying; to admonish indifferent and erring members (1 Tim. 4:2); and to be ever zealous for the winning of souls for Christ's kingdom;
- "To be faithful in the spiritual care of the young, in particular, to instruct our catechumens in the Word of God, as it is taught in the Small Catechism of Doctor Martin Luther, and, in general, to be diligent in fostering and furthering the educational agencies of our congregation(s);
- "To walk and conduct yourself at all times as it becomes a minister of Christ (1 Tim. 3:2-7; Titus 1:7-9), so that by your Christian life you may be an example to all men (Matt. 5:16); and
- "To devote your time, strength, and ability to the general advancement of the kingdom of Christ and to the gathering in of His harvest."

These words from the Installation Service for a pastor are a fair exposition of Christ's command also: "As an ambassador of Christ thou art to preach and teach the pure doctrine of the divine Word, to administer the Holy Sacraments according to the institution and ordinance of Christ, to instruct the young in the way of salvation, to counsel the inquiring, to strengthen the weak, to seek the lost and reclaim the erring, to comfort the sorrowing, to care for the

needy, to visit the sick, to minister to the dying, and ever to have at heart and pray for the spiritual welfare of every soul under thy care. Thou art to give thyself to the meditation and study of the Scriptures, to administer thy office conformably to the Word of God, and to show thyself and thy household a pattern to others in piety and godliness, giving no offense in anything, that the ministry be not blamed....Wilt thou preach and teach the pure Word of God in accordance with the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and adorn the doctrine of our Savior with a godly and holy life?"

When the risen Lord reinstated the denier Peter He was pleased to refer to the ministry of His apostle with these words, "Feed My lambs. Feed My sheep." John 21:15,17. Peter tells us what is the food that can nourish faith. It is the word of God, the same word which awakens faith. "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God...Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good." 1 Peter 1:23; 2:2-3. When Jesus had made it very plain to some of those who followed Him that He would not be their bread king, yes, that He had come for purely spiritual purposes, many disciples left Him. When Jesus asked the twelve whether they would also leave, Peter gave that beautiful and revealing confession: "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." John 6:68.

One great part of the task of the Christian congregation can be summarized as caring for the spiritual welfare of the sheep and lambs of Christ by preaching and teaching the Word of the Lord and by administering the sacraments. Another aspect of the work of the congregation is "making disciples" by preaching and teaching of the Word and by the use of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

For a Christian congregation the community has a number of different meanings. The community, as it contains unbelievers, is for the congregation the sinful world, an enemy to be reckoned with. The community, as a part of the people of the world, is loved by God. For it the Son gave the atoning sacrifice. The members of the community are to be sought and won for Christ by the preaching of the law and the gospel. The members of the congregation are to seek the lost with personal evangelism work, organized and impromptu. Jesus proclaims in the Sermon on the Mount that we Christians are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He commands, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Matt. 5:16. One author speaking of the work of a Christian congregation in winning the lost makes of the individual Christian's practice of love another means of grace. He writes: "The strategy which Christ envisions for the Church...is that Christians come so close in love, kindness, and self-sacrifice to the people of the world that they will put aside their defenses and hostilities, that they will recognize the resources for life which the Christian has, and they they will seek to share them...As these characteristics (of Christian love) emerge, however, we achieve a witness in the individual Christian which is genuinely preparatory to the Gospel of Christ."⁵

"Go make disciples of all nations...God so loved the world, that...whoever believes in him shall not perish." These familiar passages bring the blessed comfort that Christ is there for every sinner, that we can never tell the wrong person about Christ. Then everyone who comes to share the blessings we have

in the Savior should be welcome. When we see the Savior's attitude toward the publicans and sinners, when we see how Paul accepted the rage and persecution of the Jews because he went to the gentiles with the gospel, can there be any doubt as to prejudice of any kind?

Does the Christian Congregation as a congregation have any duties as regards social concerns and actions? What do Jesus' acts of healing and help, His words on the day of judgment about deeds of mercy done to Christians, His brethren, the parable of the good Samaritan, the organized efforts of the congregation at Jerusalem to take care of the needy and widows, and the great collection for the believers of Palestine say to us? One can heartily agree with the points that Prof. Schuetze makes in his paper, "1. The church has the direct commission from the Lord to teach and preach the whole counsel of God from Holy Scripture. This includes teaching its members social concern for one another as part of their life of sanctification. 2. The church may according to the example of the New Testament Church set up and administer agencies through which Christians may express their social concerns for their fellow Christians. 3. The church will teach its members to do good unto all men and may in Christian liberty administer a program which reaches out to the needs also of those outside the fellowship of faith."¹⁶

The commands relative to social concern are given to the Christians as individuals as a part of their faithborn sanctification, not as a part of the commission to the congregation. As Paul writes, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers," (Galatians 6:10) he speaks to the Christians as individuals and is teaching us what, "Love your neighbor as yourself," (Matthew 22:39) means. If we follow the example of our Savior our concern for the spiritual welfare of the neighbor will always be first. Yes, we will try to make our deeds of love in material matters openings or opportunities for offering God's greatest gift, the forgiveness of sins.

That the congregation itself does not have the task of social concern as part of its charter does not mean that the congregation is not to take these matters seriously. The matter must be made as serious as Scripture makes it, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." (1 Tim. 5:8).

What is the duty of a congregation in its community? The words of Jesus to His disciples on Easter evening provide the essential summary and place the emphasis where we have placed it, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you...Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." John 20:21-23.

III.

What are areas that need attention?

I believe that convention papers should encourage discussion. I believe that they should enable us to examine ourselves, our congregations, our district and our synod, and to see where improvement is warranted. Discussion and debate, refinement of thought by constructive disagreement is vital to progress. This last section of the paper is offered with these thoughts in mind.

The area of evangelism I deem an area of concern. I hope I am not missing some important factors when I am alarmed and deeply concerned by the number of adult confirmations reported in the annual report. The number of congregations in our synod increased in 1983 from 1159 to 1173. The number of adult confirmands decreased from 3584 to 3429. We are only the Lord's tools. He must give the increase. On the other hand there cannot be a harvest if the good seed has not been sown. Until pastors and congregations have become mission-minded and really made efforts at evangelism we should not be satisfied with an average of three adult confirmands per year per congregation.

I believe our stewardship record needs considerable improvement. When one hears how the Lord has graciously blessed the work of our missionaries and native workers in Malawi and Zambia, how happy we should be to provide the obviously needed additional worker or workers. When we see the generous number of pastoral candidates which the Lord continues to give us and the invitations which we are still receiving to begin new missions, gratitude should loosen the purse strings so that both blessings may be accepted with joy. If we cannot be zealous for mission work under such circumstances we certainly deserve blame. We don't find it hard to accept that the man in the parable would go to his neighbor in the middle of the night and just keep on pounding and pounding until the neighbor gets up and gives him some bread. What persistent prayer and persistent and zealous efforts should come from us when confronted with our mission needs.

We are certainly to be good stewards of the moneys given to our congregations. Wanting to save money can be virtuous. On the other hand, if the congregation expects from its members in business or from the businesses in its community, profitless deals the congregation can also become "cheap". That doesn't give convincing testimony that the work entrusted to us by the Savior is a treasure to us. In a similar vein I wonder what testimony the salaries that we pay for our workers in the congregations and in the synod give. Understand me. I count as very special blessings being born in the depression, having to work my way through school, and finding out how a gracious God can make a pastor with a large family and a modest income a rich man. It is a mark of God's grace that though you cannot say of the teaching and pastoral ministry that it is a good living, yet we have a rich supply of candidates. I wonder many times whether our members understand what they are asking their workers at home and in the synod to do. Do they with full knowledge ask their workers to work for little more than the minimum wage per hour? I don't believe the Savior meant this when he said, "The worker deserves his wages." Luke 10:7. That pastors and teachers are willing to serve for very modest wages, that in case of need they might be willing to do what the Apostle Paul did, is a fine testimony of their love for the Savior and their appreciation of the importance of the gospel work. By the same token, unless we are teaching that we do have a priesthood instead of a priesthood of all believers, our synod and its congregations should never have a lack of funds. I am afraid that instead of the synod as a whole recognizing what it is asking of its workers, the attitude is very often, "That is what ministers and teachers get. Ministers and teachers knew this before they entered the ministry." I don't feel sorry for pastors and teachers receiving modest wages, but I bristle at the idea that compared to other jobs and professions, such salaries should be deemed sufficient or should be a statement of the comparative worth of the ministry. If we believe that the Lord will generously provide for the generous giver should we be hesitant and apologetic in our askings for the Lord's work and satisfied with low expectations?

I believe that the area of prejudice should be an area of concern. There are problems certainly in living in a changing or a changed neighborhood. There are a great many legitimate gripes that one could voice. Prejudice is, however, not a practical answer, or more important, a Christian answer. I am afraid that one would have to say that there is a great deal of prejudice. Those who live the farthest away from the inner city want to be recognized as knowing the most about it. There are a great many people who are afraid to come to our intercity church in broad daylight and perhaps even with a police escort. If their ideas and estimates were true my children would only have been safe if guarded by husky football players armed with submachine guns. As Christians we are bound to the truth. As citizens, it is our business to be part of the solution to the problem, not a part of the problem. Prejudice is easy and it is popular if you are not in the minority, or are not harmed by the prejudice, but it is a sin.

When it comes to social needs and our response to them, again we have, I believe, an area of concern. Would anyone disagree that having a branch of Lutheran Child and Family Services in our district would be a great aid in carrying out our concerns for troubled families, teenagers, children, unwed mothers, etc.? If we look at the size of the budget for our synodical work, and look at the amount of money contributed for relief work, can we and should we be satisfied? When funds are usually short pastors and church councils try not to ask for any more new things than is absolutely necessary. If mission offerings are forever short how can we become zealous for relief projects.

Areas of concern through recognition, understanding, prayer and sanctified effort can become areas of growth and improvement. By God's grace may our areas of concern become areas of growth and improvement.

Footnotes:

1. The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959) X,477 as quoted by Prof. Armin W. Schuetze in his paper, "The Church's Social Concerns - Scriptural Imperatives and Limitations", Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, April 1975.
2. Opus cited Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, April, 1975, p. 155.
3. Opus cited, p. 164.
4. Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, January 1969.
5. The Church In The World, Richard R. Caemmerer, PHD, CPH 1949; p. 66-67.
6. Opus cited, p. 163.