

LOGIA Forum

SHORT STUDIES AND COMMENTARY

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH'S MISSION

Henry P. Hamann's book On Being A Christian has apparently become available again. It is a commendable text for confessional Lutherans. The following passage directs us to what is and what is not the mission of the Church (113–114).

The marks of the church determine the mission of the Lutheran Church in the world. It is in the world to bear clear, genuine, unambiguous witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to the sacraments he instituted: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is there to make this witness both to those who are Lutherans and to those who are not, both to Christians and to non-Christians, for it is entrusted with the very Word of God, the Word of salvation . . .

Discerning readers will probably think at this point of the argument that I have been guilty of a grave omission in my account of the mission of the church. They will be aware that most churches in the world—and especially the large representative bodies like the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation, as well as the pope of Rome—have assumed for themselves a leading role in the endeavor to bring about a better world. The various churches make solemn declarations on a whole host of important concerns: on war and peace, on poverty and health, on justice and human rights, on freedom and the role of women in society. The churches have much to say on the proper action of governments in all quarters of the globe, calling upon them to change such-and-such a policy and enact such-and-such reforms. Knowing all this, it may well be a matter for wonder that the present

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description of the mission of the church has failed to speak of such activity as part of that mission.

The answer is that the confessional Lutheran just does not consider these matters to be part of the mission of the church. A distinctive teaching of Lutheranism comes up here: the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms—although this traditional view has also been discarded by a great part of the modern Lutheran church.

IS NOTHING SACRED?

A sermon preached on 1 Corinthians 7:20–24 by the Rev. Dr. David Scaer at Kramer Chapel, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on September 25, 1998.

The idea of sacred places is becoming extinct. Also lost is the idea that some people stand out from the rest of us because of who they are. Pastors are following the lead of politicians and are called by first names. If Jimmy and Bill are our presidents, Pastor Bob, Pastor Phil, Pastor Harry are our clergymen. No one is more important or better than anyone else. All are equal. In a similar way sacred places are becoming less sacred. Historically Lutheran churches have the pulpit to one side to allow an unobstructed view of the altar. The unspoken but clear message is that the church is sacred space.

Some churches have done away with altars and pulpits and replaced them with stages. The unspoken but clear message is that no place is more sacred than any another. Upon entering these churchly auditoriums, one considers the possibility that if it were not Sunday morning, he or she may have found his or her way into a high school gym where the cheers and the pounding of basketball shoes from Saturday night's game are still heard. Pulpits, like altar rails, are construed as barriers between the minister and the people, and every barrier between God and man, pastor and people, must be torn down. Even in traditional churches, preachers abandon their pulpits and stroll friendly aisles. The ministerial ideal is Oprah. A cordless microphone is the bishop's staff. The congregation becomes an audience and the parishioners become consumers.

Sacred persons and places are vanishing. Whatever I do in the church, I can do at home or vice versa. My home is the church. The kitchen table is my altar. All are preachers. All are missionaries. All are Bible class leaders. All are ministers. Per-

sonal faith is what really matters. Whatever the minister does, any parishioner can do. It is a revision of an ancient popular song, "Anything you can do, I can do better." The one difference is that people who get their names into the *Lutheran Annual* are professionals. The rest are amateurs. Unheard against the roar of this maelstrom of ecclesiastical egalitarianism are the words of St. Paul, "Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called."

Neophyte preachers will soon discover that the people jump to conclusions never intended. Paul's sermons were twisted in every which way, at least according to Peter. His hearers jumped to conclusions he never intended. Any doctrine isolated from the body of Christian truth by the congregation can become the seed bed of heresy. Christ's return in judgment occupied a central place in apostolic preaching. The Christians in Thessalonica used this doctrine as an excuse for self-imposed unemployment and turned inactivity into a Christian virtue. Perhaps they were already looking for an excuse for an extended paid vacation. Paul's preaching about Christ's return gave them the excuse they were looking for. Most church problems border on the bizarre. The unemployment in Thessalonica was no exception.

In the environment of this chapel, one hesitates to say that St. Paul favored a Calvinistic work ethic. The Bible opens up with a God who is at work creating the world, and in the words of Luther he still works to preserve it. God commanded Adam to work, even if after he had sinned, sweat dripping into his eyes made that work less pleasant. Work belongs to the fiber of our humanity. We are made in the image of the God who works. St. Paul claims that the necessity of working belongs to the doctrine Christ entrusted to all his apostles. Jesus said we must work the works of his Father while it is day, for the night comes when no man can work.

St. Paul said his work was preaching Christ: "We preach not ourselves, but Christ crucified." In spite of this self-deprecating statement, Paul often preached about himself. He said he was the chief of sinners, a persecutor of the church of God. He also said some good things about himself. He claimed that he worked more than all the apostles. In how Paul lived, believers could see the life and death of Jesus. He was an example to others.

Second Thessalonians provides a marvelous array of Bible passages for anyone who is convinced that most unemployment is an endemic fault of the underclass, a personality defect, which can be conquered by an act of the will and a determination to be a better Christian. Unemployment during the Great Depression of the 1930s and currently in the countries of the former Soviet block is hardly the choice of the people.

Part of the Christian proclamation is helping all in distress, including those who want to work but cannot. Unemployment for religious reasons is an entirely different matter. Sitting around doing nothing, even if you claimed to be waiting for Jesus, is not an excuse to collect unemployment benefits from the church. St. Paul deals harshly with the piously unemployed. They are to be ostracized from the Christian community, which presumably includes exclusion from the Lord's supper. Starvation is the means of last resort to bring about compliance. "If anyone does not work, do not let him eat." Per-

haps we can agree with the socialistic gospel of "each according to his needs," as long as the person cannot work. Paul's final argument is himself. He and his companions had come close to working themselves to death. Sooner or later what we are works its way into our sermons.

Predictably Greek and then Hebrew are eye-openers for new seminarians. Getting dogmatics straight is another struggle. Early church is a swamp. Much more difficult is how you live your life as a preacher. Most here are not ordained, but you are no more private persons than this chapel is simply another building like a gymnasium or garage. This building is sacred. Because you are designated to be preachers of the gospel, your persons are sacred. Your voices are the voice of God and your lives are the life of Christ.

President Al Barry called our attention to the agonizing national debate over whether our highest government officials are entitled to lead private lives that contradict the obligations which they are sworn to uphold. The American political processes will resolve this question, but for us who are Christ's ambassadors this question has already been answered by St. Paul. The Thessalonians not only had a commandment that they should work, but they were to imitate him. What we do and how we live confirms the gospel that we preach.

Fourth-year students and more particularly their wives are understandably reluctant about losing their private lives for the sake of the public image of the holy ministry. You cannot do one thing in your private lives and another in your public lives. Ministerial profession and personal commitment cannot be separated. Separating the man from the office is only another form of Nestorianism.

What we are as ministers penetrates our entire existence. The office of the ministry is not like a benign tumor without any relation to who we are. There is an active communication of attributes between who we are and the gospel we preach. The message we preach shapes our lives and our lives give form to our preaching. Many of you have come to the seminary because you intend to imitate the lives of pious pastors who strongly influenced you in your decision for the ministry. St. Paul lived his private life in such a way that the Thessalonians could find an example of how they too should live. He believed his life, his sufferings, and his death were images, mirrors, and icons of Christ's life and death, a kind of picture book. But his life was more. Christ's sufferings were actually enfleshed in St. Paul. Brothers, we have no choice but to let these sufferings come to expression in us to whom the gospel is now entrusted. "For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us.

"Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, we did not eat any one's bread without paying, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you. It was not because we have not that right, but to give you in our conduct an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If any one will not work, let him not eat."