

11-1-1933

The Ministry of the Word in These Trying Times

K. Kretzschmar

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kretzschmar, K. (1933) "The Ministry of the Word in These Trying Times," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 4 , Article 114.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol4/iss1/114>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Much of this nightmarish crying for atheism strikes one as coming from pained and anguished consciences that have suffered self-inflicted violence. When Johnny had wilfully slipped away from his father and would not go back to him, he said, first to himself, then to others, "There is no father."

Berkeley, Cal., May 10, 1933.

W. H. T. DAU.

The Ministry of the Word in These Trying Times.

Periods of adversity in the life of the Church and the world always involve a special challenge to the ministry of the Word. The present era of spiritual, social, and economic distress is no exception. Within the memory of the generation now living there has never been a general situation demanding more earnest attention, single-hearted consecration, and enlightened action on the part of God's ambassadors on earth than that created by the developments of these trying times.

How are we leaders of the Church meeting the challenge of the present emergency? Are we really aware of the urgency of this challenge? Have we learned to rise to the opportunities it presents? Are we equal to the responsibilities it imposes? Do we appreciate the peculiar blessings issuing from it?

I.

The opportunities created by the tribulations of the present day are varied and unique. The average pastor found it difficult during the piping times of prosperity to bring about an attitude of sincere repentance among his people. True spirituality, Christlike humility, and other Christian virtues were alarmingly rare. Materialism, worldliness, selfishness, pride, even sensuality — the vices of a deteriorating world — had penetrated into, and were becoming prevalent everywhere in, the Church. But whenever attention was directed to these conditions and people were called on to mend their ways lest God should be moved to visit them with His chastisements, the reaction was often painfully disappointing. Many of our people remained entirely indifferent. There seemed to be a growing disposition among them to resent calls to repentance. Were things really as bad as preachers tried to make them believe? Why be alarmed about anything while shiploads of blessings were steadily coming in on the crest of an unprecedented and seemingly boundless tide of material prosperity?

The growing unconcern shown to the indictments of the divine Law was accompanied by a corresponding unresponsiveness to the gracious appeals of the saving Gospel. How difficult it seemed to be for many to seek the invisible, spiritual treasures of the kingdom of

God while there was an abundance of material things to satisfy the wants and desires of the body! How few felt the need of looking forward to the as yet unseen joys of heaven while the visible world seemed such an interesting and pleasant place to live in! And how rare a thing it was becoming to serve God diligently, to work for the church faithfully, and to bring real sacrifices cheerfully for the winning of souls and the extension of the kingdom of God when it felt so much better and seemed so much easier to serve self, to lay up treasures on earth, and to enjoy the things that money could buy!

And when the average pastor viewed his contacts with the world around him, surveyed the field of his missionary opportunities, and soberly weighed the prospects and results of his soul-winning activities, how disappointing and fruitless even his best endeavors seemed to be! With the world full of idols that apparently served their votaries well, how difficult it was indeed to bring about the feeling of a need for God! Who could be induced to desire salvation for his soul while his body was so well fed, bank balances were mounting, and there was so much pleasure to satisfy the cravings of the flesh? Who wanted to be in church when it seemed so much more profitable and pleasant to live outside, in the world?

Many a faithful pastor faced a situation so distressing with a feeling of utter futility and, perhaps, wished in his heart that God might send want instead of plenty and hunger instead of fulness. What though there were still the proverbial "seven thousand in Israel" to comfort the troubled heart of the Lord's prophet, what though people were still being gathered in and there was some increase in membership, not one of us was really satisfied with things as they were, and deep down in the heart of many a perplexed brother dwelt a feeling of ominous foreboding as to what the future might have in store for a world so proud and callous and a Church so worldly-minded and ungrateful.

Past presentiments have become a present and painful reality. But the change brought about by the social and economic crisis of to-day ought to be welcomed by every true-minded minister of the Word. Has there been within the memory of the present generation a more favorable opportunity for us church leaders to prove the efficacy of Gospel-preaching, the value of the Church's spiritual resources, and the importance of the ministerial office than is being offered in the present world emergency?

The visitations of these trying times are having certain very noticeable effects. Within the Church the intoxication and mounting speed of prosperous living has given way to a real sobering up and a much-needed slowing down in the pace of life's activities. Our people are to-day doing more serious and constructive thinking than they have done for quite a time. In almost every home there are

hearts that are sore from the afflictions of the depression. There is among Christian people a more receptive mind for the call to repentance and a deeper hunger for the Gospel's comfort than has been in evidence for years. Many of our young people are more seriously thoughtful and readily responsive to wholesome advice than they took time to be during the years of so-called prosperity. The number of parents who are realizing that their children need much more than a mere twenty-minute period of Sunday-school teaching a week is increasing. While there has been of course no fundamental and signal revival of spiritual life in the Church and the problems created by the prosperity of past years have not yet been solved, it is nevertheless a fact that there is everywhere a growing number of chastened, sober-minded, penitent Christians who are ready to heed the prophet's appeal: "Come and let us return unto the Lord; for He hath torn, and He will heal us; He hath smitten, and He will bind us up," Hos. 6, 1.

Moreover, in the world around us there are men and women everywhere who are like ships without rudder or anchor, being tossed about helplessly on the rough seas of the present economic distress. They have lost their idols in whom they trusted and are looking vainly for truth, safety, comfort, light, and hope. The brightly illuminated highway of their joy-riding has come to an end, and they find themselves on a rocky detour, with no fuel in their engine and with the lights gone out. Some of them for the first time in their lives, or perhaps once again after a long absence, are finding their way into the churches. Others are straying about like lost sheep, not knowing which way to turn. Everywhere there are multitudes who are spiritually homeless, destitute, and lost and who for once are willing to admit that they have come to the end of their resources. There is more general conversation about religion and the Church to-day than there has been since the beginning of the World War.

It is true, the world is as blind in spiritual things and as indifferent to Gospel-preaching as it ever was. There is not to-day, nor ever will be, a general movement of humanity toward the Church and what it stands for. But there is greater need than ever before of the Gospel's divine power unto salvation, and there has never been a more signal opportunity to show forth the glory of that Gospel and to point out the futility of a life without it than is presented to-day. Besides, many obstacles with which the Church must contend in its soul-winning work during times of material prosperity are not in evidence at this time. The din and ballyhoo of Mammon Street and Pleasure Avenue have somewhat died down, and the still, small voice of the saving Word has again a chance to make itself heard. People that hitherto were constantly "on the go" can be found at home now, and there are open doors in many places where there were none before.

What a challenge is there in this situation for the Church that has the Bread of Life to offer its spiritual wares to a starving world and for us servants of the Word to wait on our ministering! If there ever was a favorable season to exalt before the eyes of men the excellence of the divine Word, to hold up the Cross of Christ as the beacon of comfort and hope, and to glorify before the world the Christian Church as the city of refuge for hunted and homeless souls, that season is now. Why mark time? Why wait for so-called better days? "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation." Let us work while it is day, before the night cometh when no man can work.

II.

However, if the world's emergency constitutes the Church's opportunity, it also creates a special responsibility, particularly for the Church's spiritual leaders.

The deplorable situation in which humanity happens to be and by which the Church, too, is sorely affected is due not so much to a mere social deterioration, economic congestion, or industrial breakdown as it is to the sins and crimes of nations and individuals. Not civic short-sightedness, but universal godlessness, not commercial mistakes, but flagrant transgressions against God's Law have put us where we are. The world at large only dimly realizes this aspect of its ills. The remedies of which it knows are of a mere material nature. They can be applied only to the symptoms and do not penetrate to the fundamental cause and source of the trouble. They may bring about a seeming and superficial improvement, but can effect no thorough and permanent cure. Not the world, but the Church alone possesses the remedy that reaches the root of all human ailments and that can bring about real and lasting healing.

The present emergency, therefore, addresses its challenge not so much to the political, social, and industrial leaders of humanity as rather—and with compelling directness—to those who have been called to spiritual, religious, and moral leadership, the ministers of the Word.

It is true, the world to-day needs the ablest social and political leaders that the human race can produce, and we pray that God will raise them up and give the world the benefit of their talents and capacities. But what, after all, can presidents, legislators, financiers, and others of the world's great—even dictators—do for the spiritual life and the morals of mankind? They may be able to patch up our faulty industrial, commercial, financial systems, but they are helpless in the face of the growing moral corruption of the human heart and the increasing godlessness of society.

What the world really needs is *to be saved from sin*. Human hearts need to be converted to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Man

needs a new heart rather than a "new deal." In fact, the problem of the present crisis is none other than the age-old question as to how man may get back into the right relation to God and how he may continue in this state amid the pernicious influences that seek to corrupt and destroy it. No material problems will baffle solution when the supreme question of man's reconciliation to his God has found its proper answer.

As for the Church in particular, never has it been in need of consecrated and intelligent guidance more than it is to-day. While its material and economic problems are of course those of the world at large, these are really of minor significance and do not vitally affect the life of the kingdom of God either one way or the other. The social and political leadership on which so much stress is being laid and to which so much hope is being attached to-day can therefore do very little for the Church and its peculiar problems and is wholly unable to strengthen the weakened spiritual fiber of Christianity. What the Church needs is, first of all, to be brought to a penitent realization of its past sins of commission and omission. It must be induced to plead guilty to a major portion of the blame for the present state of world affairs, because, instead of continuing to function as the salt of the earth, it had been losing its savor and had opened its gates to let the Trojan horse of worldliness move in. It must be taught to apply to itself the Lord's charge voiced through the mouth of the prophet of old: "Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backsliding shall reprove thee; know therefore and see that it is an evil thing and bitter that thou hast forsaken the Lord, thy God, and that My fear is not in thee, saith the Lord God of hosts," Jer. 2, 19.

The call to repentance must then be followed by the stirring appeal of the saving Gospel, by which alone the Church can be revived in its faith-life and spiritual activity. A renewed interest in the means of grace, a deepened appreciation of the mercies of God in Christ Jesus, a freshly stimulated devotion to the kingdom of God and its affairs, a newly stirred consecration to the work of the Lord, must be aroused in the lives and hearts of our people.

This aspect of the situation—the only right view—puts the demand for action squarely up to those who have been trained and called for the great task of saving sinners, of turning men's hearts from their idols to penitent acceptance of Jesus Christ as their Redeemer, of building up the vineyard of the Lord in order that the good fruit of godliness may be forthcoming in due season. It is to every called servant of the Word that the Lord addresses Himself in the words He once spoke to the prophet Ezekiel: "O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the Word at My mouth and warn them from Me. When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou

do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood will I require at thy hand. Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it, if he do not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity, but thou hast delivered thy soul," Ezek. 33, 7-9.

The responsibility thus laid upon the servants of the Word implies and demands the highest degree of consecration on our part to the sublime office committed to us. It demands a searching self-examination as to the state of our own spiritual lives, the spirit of our service, and the extent of our personal responsibility for the present deplorable conditions in the Church and the world at large. It demands fervent daily repentance and humble appeals to the mercy-seat of the Cross for pardon and grace. It demands an increasing amount of wisdom and knowledge and more than ever before lays upon us the duty of Scripture-searching and other activities of private study. It demands more and more attention to soul-winning, sick-visiting, stray sheep seeking, and other personal contacts with people around us. It demands more urgently than ever before that we continue instant in prayer, that we keep ourselves unspotted from the world, and that we cheerfully bring every sacrifice required of us in the performance of our duties. It demands that we set a shining example of spirituality, joyful trust, and whole-hearted church devotion to our people and the world around us. In brief, the responsibility created by the present emergency demands that we servants of the Word, by God's help, rise to the highest possible level of efficiency in all things pertaining to our stewardship over the mysteries of God.

This responsibility lies upon us Lutheran church leaders with particular urgency because of the fact that sectarian Christianity in the world has become a house divided against itself, blows no clear-sounding trumpet of doctrine, and offers neither comfort nor help to the stricken hearts of men in these trying times. If we among whom God in His mercy has preserved the saving truth in its purity and fulness do not bear confident testimony, who is there left to serve as witness of light, hope, and life in this floundering world?

The questions that each one of us should ask himself at this point are, "Do I recognize and improve the opportunities of this day of visitation? Am I effectively meeting the responsibilities of my calling in the present emergency? If out of the mysterious unseen a hand suddenly appeared and wrote upon the wall of my study a divine appraisal of my stewardship, would the message read, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant'? Or would it be, '*Mene, mene, tekel*—weighed, measured, and found wanting'?"

May these trying times not only move us to preach and teach repentance among our people, may they especially also cause us to practise sincere repentance ourselves. The more thoroughly our own

spiritual lives are benefited in and by the present visitation, the more effectively shall we improve the opportunities and meet the responsibilities created by to-day's world emergency.

III.

We add a concluding thought.

Adversities always result in blessings for God's people. That is what they are intended for. We servants of the Word are the recipients of a particularly generous measure of these blessings during these trying times. Not only do we share in the benefits intended for the Church as a whole, we also enjoy certain special favors as ministers of God in the Church. Who is more fortunate during an epidemic than the doctor with a sure and effective remedy? Who is more to be envied during a famine than a baker with a goodly supply of bread?

Since nothing is in greater demand for the well-being of the Church and the world to-day than the spiritual treasures committed to our charge, we ministers of the Word should consider ourselves especially blessed in the occupation of a position which keeps us in intimate touch with these treasures. In the arid wilderness of this world our calling has given us a home close to the ever-flowing fountain of divine truth and comfort. While material assets have been disappearing in the general economic breakdown, we servants of the Lord are privileged to retain not only our official position, but also our spiritual resources in God's ever-solvent bank of soul assets and heavenly riches. Are there capitalists more fortunate than we? Must not the present world emergency serve to impress us with the glorious privileges which are ours as stewards of the limitless assets in the household of God?

Moreover a larger number of human hearts to-day than ever before are filled with thoughts of thankfulness for the labors of faithful ministers of the Word. And even where such appreciation is not given voice in words of commendation, every faithful steward of the Lord knows that his ministry is the source of the only real abiding comfort enjoyed by the hearts of God's people to-day, and he is justified in finding deep satisfaction in that thought.

Above all, against the dark background of these trying times there stands out in vivid contrast the bright fact that God is even now preparing the new heaven and the new earth, which are to take the place of this disintegrating universe. And it is the ministry of the Word through which the Lord is organizing a kingdom for that new creation and through which the blood-bought souls of men everywhere are being cleansed and purified for citizenship in that realm of glory. Can there be a calling more sublime, noble, and satisfying than that of cooperating in a project so vast and important? As the truth of these considerations impresses itself upon our hearts, it becomes

844 Die Hauptschriften Luthers in Chronologischer Reihenfolge.

a source of special encouragement to us in the stewardship of our ministry. We dare not permit ourselves to become wearied by the arduousness of our calling and the disappointments that inevitably occur. For every step of our way we have the Lord's cheering assurance: "Fear not, for I am with thee; be not dismayed, for I am thy God; I will strengthen thee. Yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of My righteousness."

Fort Smith, Ark.

K. KRETZSCHMAR.

Die Hauptschriften Luthers in Chronologischer Reihenfolge.

Mit Anmerkungen.

(Fortsetzung.)

1537. „Auslegung des christlichen Glaubens.“ — Dies ist eine Predigt, die Luther im Jahre 1537 zu Schmalkalden gehalten hat. Seine Abreise von Wittenberg (mit Melancthon und Bugenhagen) fand am 31. Januar statt, und seine Rückkehr erfolgte am 14. März. Die Hinreise ging über Torgau, Grimma, Altenburg, Eisenberg, Weimar, Arnstadt und Waltershausen, die Rückreise über Tam bach, Gotha, Erfurt, Weimar, Altenburg und Grimma. In Schmalkalden erkrankte Luther so schlimm, daß man mehrere Ärzte zu Rate zog. Die Predigt über die drei Artikel hielt Luther am 11. Februar im Hause des Rentmeisters. Sie behandelt in kurzer, einfacher Weise die Hauptpunkte des Apostolischen Symbolums. (St. Louiser Ausgabe X, 982—993.)

1537. „Schmalkaldische Artikel.“ — Die erste Ausgabe dieser Artikel, von Luther eigenhändig besorgt, hat den Titel „Artidel, so da hetten sollen außß Con cission zu Mantua, oder wo es würde sein, vberantwortet werden, von vnserß teils wegen. Vnd was wir annemen oder geben kündten oder nicht usw. D. Mart. Luth. Wittenberg. MDXXXVII“, wobei sich die Jahreszahl auf die erste Druck legung bezieht. Luther hatte sich nämlich schon am 12. Dezember 1536 an die Aus arbeitung der Schmalkaldischen Artikel gemacht, so daß er sie bereits am 3. Januar 1537 an den Kurfürsten übersenden konnte. Die Theologen versammelten sich am 12. Februar. (St. Louiser Ausgabe XVI, 1916—1950. Nr. 1226. Vgl. die folgenden Nummern.)

A n m e r k u n g. Unter den Auslegungen dieses Jahres finden sich: 1. und 2. Kapitel des Johannevangeliums; Matth. 18—24 in Predigten ausgelegt (ge druckt 1796, 1817, 1847); 14. und 15. Kapitel St. Johannis gepredigt.

1537. „Artikel des allerheiligsten päpstlichen Glaubens von der Donatio Con stantini an das aufgeschobene Konzil zu Mantua.“ — Diese Schrift plante Luther am 17. Mai, und schon am 22. Juli wurde sie versandt. Sie ist eine Verdeutschung eines päpstlichen Erlasses, mit Glossen versehen. Die Schärfe der Einseitung zu dieser Schrift wird in den Glossen fortgesetzt. Der eigentlichen Schrift folgt eine scharfe Abhandlung Luthers in 44 Paragraphen, mit allerlei geschichtlichen Nach weisen betreffs der Übergriffe verschiedener Päpste und der Tatsache, „daß der römische Bischof nichts mehr sei denn einer andern Stadt Bischof“. (St. Louiser Ausgabe XVI, 2045—2068.)

1538. „Die drei Symbola oder Bekenntnisse des Glaubens Christi, in der Kirche einträchtig gebraucht.“ — In dieser Schrift behandelt Luther ganz kurz das Apostolikum, das Quicumque, das Te Deum Laudamus, dem er 40 Paragraphen widmet, und das Symbolum Nicaenum. Besonders Interesse beansprucht der dritte oder Hauptteil der Schrift. (St. Louiser Ausgabe X, 992—1019.)

A n m e r k u n g. In dieses Jahr gehören Luthers Annotationes in ali quot cap. Matthaei und „Das 16. Kapitel Johannis gepredigt und ausgelegt“ sowie „Auslegung des 3. und 4. Kapitels Johannis“ (gedruckt 1847). Auch fällt in dieses Jahr eine revidierte Ausgabe des „Unterrichts an die Visitatoren“.