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The Pastor and Youth

At any given moment in his ministry the pastor in active congregational service is face to face with three age groups. A local church is a cross-section of the family of God. There are the old, for whom the ministrations of the servant of the Word are largely a preparation for a near eternity. There are the middle-aged, who must be carried through sorrow and defeat even though their religious habits and attitudes have been fixed by the years. And there are the young, at one and the same time a very precious and a very unstable part of the flock, whom under the blessing of God the pastor can mold and train for consecrated service to the Church. In his public preaching as well as in his individual ministrations the faithful servant of God is always conscious of the differing needs and varying attitudes of these three groups.

When the course of the civilization in which the Church finds herself proceeds evenly and not too rapidly, the need for a conscious and purposeful evaluation of the three age groups in a local congregation may not be so immediately evident. But when humanity enters upon a period of change and transition and social patterns shift, the difference between old and young may become alarming. Around the changelessness of the human heart men can build a changing environment, which may bring new problems and new temptations, make old problems more acute, or shift the emphasis so that a minor difficulty in the path of the Church of God becomes a major obstacle. To minimize or ignore the tremendous impact of social change upon the physical, mental, and spiritual life of a generation by falling back upon the changelessness of the human heart and refusing to study these changed conditions as they affect the life of the Church is a particularly vicious form of obscurantism. One need point only to the care with which St. Paul, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, evaluated the

varying circumstances of the churches which he addressed in a similar period of social change in order to see how important the consciousness of changes is to the faithful pastor. Such careful study of the world as it is enables the servant of the Church to strike direct and hard into the lives of the men and women whom God has entrusted to him.

The social changes which have come over the world during the last generation are sufficiently familiar to our clergy. It is, however, important to note that the changes and tendencies most dangerous to the life and work of the Church are not necessarily the most obvious. The urbanization of our people both physically and mentally, the blatant immorality of our literature and theater, the growing tension between the classes of our civilization, the changes in family life, — these have been evaluated again and again in our church journals. Less obvious but undoubtedly far more insidiously significant are the changes in the thought-life of our people, the complete secularization of almost all areas of life, and the growing danger of a collectivism under the control of the State. The totalitarian State, in whatever form it may appear, is today perhaps the greatest danger on the horizon of the Church. In sections of Europe where the process of absorbing the individual body, mind, and soul into the life of the State is farther advanced than in the world's democracies, the fatal effects of the totalitarian ideology are already evident. But also here in America the signs of totalitarian thinking are multiplying. Two generations ago we began to entrust the education of our youth to the State. Today the State endeavors to occupy their growing leisure time, largely takes care of their physical welfare, and trains them to look to the State for the amelioration of all human ills. The danger in all this lies not in the more obvious direction of an openly antichristian philosophy of life presented by instructors and leaders hostile to Christianity. It lies rather in the complete silence concerning the supreme place of religion in life, its watering down to the minimum of ethics required by a complex social order, and its forced retreat to a small area of human life comparable in the consciousness of youth to the time spent at divine services on Sunday morning. It is evident from the history of the Church that her most successful days came when a state of tension existed between Church and State and there was no possibility that the Church could be considered an adjunct of the State. The line of demarcation must remain sharp and deep. Written in other times but under somewhat similar circumstances, Luther's words are still valid: "Ich wollt' lieber . . . aller Kaiser, Koenige und Fuersten Weisheit und Recht wider mich lassen zeugen denn ein Iota oder ein Tuettel der ganzen heiligen christlichen Kirche wider mich hoeren oder sehen." (Quoted in

Walther's *Kirche und Amt*, p. 149.) When our people, particularly the rising generation, are taught to look to the State for direction in every conceivable area of life and living, the Church must not only protest, but also institute a positive program, which will keep God and His Word in the center of life and thought.

Changes and shifts in our social patterns, open or hidden, naturally affect the most unstable section of our membership, the younger generation, most deeply. Both the time and the nature of these changes demand of our ministry a restudy of our care of youth and its eventual adjustment to the world in which they must live. In this task the influence of the State will be almost entirely negative. It must not only be controlled, but in many cases even counteracted. Far less help can be expected from the family than a generation ago, especially in urban communities. Confronted with the problems of carrying a generation through a period of transition not only in their own lives but also in the life of the world, the faithful pastor will pay increasing attention to the youngest age group in his congregation. His task is the double task of preserving a heritage in a day when the past is too easily forgotten and of preserving a generation in an hour when the confusing promises and threats of an uncertain and clouded future make them restless and uneasy.

In his divinely imposed task the pastor has his divinely given tools. He can operate only with the means of grace. If the impact of world changes has led us to believe that in our work with youth we must have recourse to new means of training the younger generation, we have made a tragic mistake. To compete with the world in fields in which the world has the power of numbers and money is to invite disaster. The average motion-picture, for example, is better entertainment than most of the farces and comedies we can produce. Only when the Church offers that which the world cannot give, in season and out of season, with all the power of the Spirit of God in its appeal, can there be hope for eventual success. This does not mean that we may not employ new methods and new skills or that we should not train our guns more skilfully in the direction of the enemy. But it does mean that the foundation of all our work will be the Word and the Sacraments. Perhaps they will have to be more frequently applied, more insistently recommended, more variously presented, but they are and will remain the only and all-sufficient tools God has given us. We need no new tools, but we may need a more efficient and effective use of them.

In his work with youth the faithful pastor in this day and age will be deeply conscious of their specific problems as he prepares for his preaching. Since the walls of nationalistic isolation which

formerly surrounded our people have broken down, our younger generation is in constant and intimate contact with men and women outside the visible Church. Although outspoken atheists and agnostics among their acquaintances may be rare, they frequently meet people whose religion differs from their own. Questions arise that must be answered. A series of forthright doctrinal sermons, warm and appealing, setting forth the beauty, grandeur, and truth of the historic position of the Lutheran Church, will find an immediate response. Our younger generation has been trained to expect proof and not mere assertion. Nor will they be satisfied with the presentation of doctrine in a vacuum without prompt application to their individual lives. The meaning of the deity of Christ, of the atonement, of the inspiration of the Scriptures, of justification by faith, can be made vital by a deep consciousness of their immediate relation to the Christian life. Sectarian preaching has so largely failed to appeal to youth because it has refused to recognize the fact that mere sentiment or moralizing is too close to the philosophy of the radio and the motion-picture. If the Church has nothing more than that, she has nothing at all.

In our preaching on the Christian life in the twentieth century there is great danger that we become too continuously negative. There are negatives in the divine Word, and they must be applied with power. But constant preaching *against* things will leave a congregation, particularly youth, hungry and depressed. This is only another way of saying that the Law does not satisfy. Surrounded as we are by a pagan world, we may in our human frailty be tempted to reduce our sermons to mere negation and protest instead of making them full channels for the infinite love of God in Christ and its all-inclusive implications for the life of the Christian in this world. Today this would include, particularly for our youth, a renewed emphasis on the eternal and supreme importance of the individual human soul in the divine order of things. Totalitarianism and collectivism tend to disregard the dignity of the individual soul and to think in terms of numbers. Increasingly we are set in a world of crowds. Totals, aggregates, and masses count more and more. When the threat of economic insecurity is added to this disappearance of the individual, our young people often feel unimportant and alone. Unceasingly the faithful pastor will therefore point out the importance of the individual in the life of the world and of the Church. The coming of the Savior and His atonement have placed a new, imperial, and eternal value on the human soul which no collectivism should destroy.

In addition to a consciousness of the problem of his young people in preparing his sermons the pastor also will find opportunities to address them more directly as a group. The great

majority of our congregations now have organized young people's groups. Organization is usually desirable since it fixes responsibility, provides a more stable group, trains for congregational work, and offers a working unit to the busy pastor. It is probable that the next decade will witness a gradual elimination of the artificial line we have drawn at the age of confirmation. It should be completely wiped out. The young people of postconfirmation age should be considered with the same sense of responsibility as the children of preconfirmation age. Even if the pastor himself, by press of time and circumstance, is not able to conduct all the affairs of his postconfirmation group, he will definitely set aside sufficient time to meet with them regularly. The sudden reduction of our faithful and thorough confirmation training, three or four times a week, to perhaps one haphazard meeting a month is one of the major tragedies of our youth program. In his meetings with his young people as a group the pastor has an excellent opportunity to discuss more specifically the problems of their individual lives and conditions in the world. Such matters as the motion-picture, the radio, reading, the dance, drinking, business ethics, dress, opportunities for service, education, crime, the theater, the newspaper, and many others suggest themselves immediately. Also the cultural attitudes of youth must be guided and directed by the Church.

The very nature of our environment makes it vitally necessary for the faithful pastor to work with the youth of his congregation as a distinct group. In addition to the special problems which their attitudes, mental, social, and spiritual, present, the pastor can usually transform his youth group into an efficient working unit in the congregation. At times even the best local churches need revitalization. The spiritual life and thought of the older generation may become barren and sterile. In such circumstances the pastor will turn directly to the most flexible and impressionable part of his flock and endeavor to train them for greater service to the Church. Hundreds of our pastors have discovered that in their youth group they have a flexible working unit, which can become of inestimable value to the work of the local congregation. It is a tragic mistake to limit our demands upon the younger generation to a passive loyalty, which endeavors only to hold them with the Church, without making them working participants in the activities of the Kingdom. While it is true that the youth of the Church is the Church of tomorrow, it is also true that they are a large and important section of the Church of today. It is entirely probable that the coming decade will see a renewed emphasis on the possibilities of young people's work from the point of view of active service. In this direction lies much of our

future. The young people's group should become more and more a training-school for service in the congregation. In the course of the years almost every fault in our congregational life can be corrected by training youth in new and better attitudes. The opportunities for active Christian service, for stewardship, and for personal mission endeavor must necessarily first be presented to the rising generation.

The participation of the pastor in the social activities of his young people must remain largely an individual problem, whose solution is determined by the personality of the pastor and local circumstances. Some pastors can enter into the play-life of their young people without loss of dignity. Different personalities are unable to do that. In most cases, however, our pastors, with their long training and background, can and should take part in some of the social activities of the youth of the congregation. Often the more informal contact offered by the social life of youth enables a pastor to look more deeply into the problems of the individual young men and women. He will be able to discern hidden faults, maladjustments, antisocial attitudes, and incipient neuroses. Much of his spiritual therapy can proceed from these intimate contacts with the young people at play. Naturally limitations of time will determine how many hours a month he will be able to devote to this task.

In his work with the individual young man or woman the pastor will be conscious of the home conditions of the individual. It is a cause for gratitude to Almighty God that many of our Lutheran homes still stand firm and that the pastor can expect the home to work in the same direction as the Church. In many instances, however, the home is no longer a working unit of the Church. This particular condition creates a host of new problems. Perhaps one of the major differences between the Church of the nineteenth and of the twentieth century lies in the fact that the Church today is no longer composed of families but of individuals. In his attack upon this particular difficulty the pastor may conduct regular meetings with parents, encourage them to take an active interest in the work and play of their children, and endeavor to arouse in the entire congregation a deep sense of responsibility for its youth. Too often the pastor stands entirely alone in his care for, and interest in, young people. It should be our objective to arouse a sense of corporate responsibility for youth which will keep congregational interest in the life of the young people alive and vital.

In his work with the individual young man and woman the faithful pastor will bring to his task a sympathetic understanding of the world in which they live and the obstacles in the path of the Christian way of life. In every congregation there are today

a number of problem children. Maladjustments begin at a comparatively early age. Especially in urban communities, where the life of the street is substituted for the life of the home, unchristian attitudes can develop with alarming rapidity. It therefore becomes necessary for the pastor to check over his confirmation classes with increasing regularity and to keep a watchful eye especially on those who are beginning to drift toward the fringes of the congregation. Such work will require many hours of interviews and personal consultation. For help and an understanding of the problems of adolescence and youth a number of excellent manuals are now available. Pastors throughout our Church have been exceedingly successful with so-called "problem hours." A certain evening of the week is set aside for private interviews with young people of the congregation. Gradually they come to know that at this particular hour the pastor's door is open to them. If they are greeted with sympathy and understanding, they will make more and more use of this opportunity to consult their pastor and receive spiritual guidance and help.

In his work with youth the pastor will be careful to make a thorough study of local conditions. At times there is a festering sore in the community, a dance-hall or a tavern, which should be closed by law. It may be that there are insufficient recreational facilities in the community, so that especially the adolescents are driven to the streets. It may be that moral conditions in the local high school should be investigated. Under such circumstances the pastor should not hesitate to complain to the proper authorities and take all measures within his power to eliminate as many temptations of the modern world as possible from the lives of his young people.

Our confessional Lutheran Church is approaching the hundredth anniversary of its coming to the shores of America. At the end of the first century of our existence we are face to face with new and unprecedented opportunities in a land of social change, decaying Protestantism, and pagan influences. Our care of the youth of the Church is therefore a problem of paramount importance. If under the mercy of God we can place into our troubled world a generation well indoctrinated and well trained for a life of Christian service, we shall have done much to build a Church which can face the future unafraid. In this work the activities of the local congregation are the beginning and the end. The pastor who presents to his young people a program with all the authority of the divine Word cannot fail. It is this spirit, conscious of the changelessness of our tools and the changing conditions of our world, which must dominate our program for the youth of the Church.

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