

# Concordia Theological Monthly

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## Foreword

F. E. Mayer

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Mayer: Foreword

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# Concordia Theological Monthly

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## Foreword

1900—1950: the end of the first half of the twentieth century brings mankind to an important milestone in the history of the world. The pastor will take time out to review the events of the past five decades and to evaluate correctly the signs of the times. But more important still, mindful of the fleeting of time and the approaching end of all time, the pastor will employ this opportunity to review his work not in terms of years, decades, centuries, millennia, but *sub specie aeternitatis*.

### I

How can this half of our century be best characterized? As the century of progress? True, in 1900 our life was geared to the snail's pace of the horse and buggy, and fifty years later we rush through life at supersonic speed. But has the race really made progress? The standard of living, at least in our country, has never been higher, but the standards of morality seem to have reached the same depths as the pagan world of old. Should we therefore not rather speak of the past fifty years as the age of shocking contrasts: tremendous advances in civilization and enlightenment and some of the worst examples of man's inhumanity to man; sincere efforts to establish world peace and a reckless waste of life and property on the battlefields of the world; the opportunity to harness the forces of nature for man's physical well-being and man's apparent determination to turn them into instruments of annihilation. Man has acquired the know-how to control the physical forces of nature in a degree heretofore unknown; yet he permits the evil forces in his own bosom to destroy him physically, morally, spiritually. Never before have Christian missions been conducted on so global a scale; at no other time have persecutions taken such a heavy toll of Christian lives as in Eastern Europe during our time.

No wonder that modern man is confused. It is therefore not unlikely that future historians will characterize our age as the century of confusion. "Today it has become the fashion to be bewildered," a prominent educator stated recently. Confusion seems to be the chief characteristic of our age. And is it any wonder? During the past fifty years the scientist, the philosopher, the educator, has challenged virtually everything, and in his endeavor to debunk the traditions of the past he has discarded most of them as being out of date, irrelevant, impractical. And at the root of much of the world-wide confusion and bewilderment is the theological confusion of the past fifty years. In 1899 Ernst H. Haeckel published "*Weltraetzel*" (*The Riddle of the Universe*, 1900), in which he outlined the program for an intellectual enlightenment of the 20th century. But this volume has actually proved itself to be the obituary of the 19th century scientific hypotheses. In 1899 Washington Gladden's *What Is Left of the Old Doctrines?* was hailed with delight in certain circles. Liberal theology had "re-examined and re-studied" the old doctrines and "debunked" them. And the result? Confusion, uncertainty, bewilderment. In his confusion the theologian was like the pendulum swinging from one extreme to the other. Unfortunately the theological pendulum will always do so if it is not regulated by the one inerrant norm. Liberal theology rejected the Scriptures as the only source of truth and in its stead established the scientific and empirical method as *principium cognoscendi*. Psychology, sociology, history of religion, science, were to replace theology. But the omni-competence of science proved to be a fool's paradise. Today men ask, Where is religious authority? Is it to be sought in reason? in a mystical experience? in a personal encounter with truth? in the cumulative experience of the Church? Some have gone back to the Bible, but subject the Bible to a literalistic and extremely apocalyptic interpretation. Still others claim to have turned to a sort of middle ground by placing their faith on "the living Christ," whatever that may mean.

Fifty years ago liberal theology attempted to "humanize" God. Some theologians "redefined" the concept of God as the "personality-evolving-process," all the factors in one's environment which make him an integrated personality. Today the pendulum

has swung almost completely from the divine immanence theory to a concept of God as the Wholly Other, the Absolute, the Sovereign. The current theological confusion is evident, furthermore, in the views concerning the nature and destiny of man. A half century ago sin was viewed as a quest for God, a step in the process of evolution, and man was said to be an angel, at least a saint. Recently the theological pendulum has swung to a modern form of Flacianism, which makes of man a despicable worm, if not a devil, but which, just like Flacianism, fails completely to understand the true nature of sin. In the doctrine of Christ's person confusion has been made worse confounded. Fifty years ago theologians attempted to find the "historical Jesus" and in this quest denied the deity of Christ; today men listen to the dialectical speculations about a "superhistorical Christ," which ignore, or at least consider as irrelevant, the historical Jesus. At the beginning of this century many theological leaders said that the kingdom of God was at hand, for they felt quite certain that they had finally prepared the blueprints for a new social order on the basis of the Golden Rule. But the catastrophes and the resultant disillusionment of the last decades have supplanted this Utopian dream with cynicism, stark pessimism, or a weird apocalypticism. There is not one doctrine of the Christian faith in which the pendulum has not swung from one extreme to the other during the past fifty years. As a result men in and outside the Church are bewildered. They do not know whither to turn. They have lost all sense of direction, and — at least to some extent — they realize that modern man has lost his bearings. But in his attempt to find a way out of the confusion modern man is only becoming more hopelessly lost in the labyrinthian blind alleys of moralism, or hedonism, or fatalism, or mysticism, or cynicism, or asceticism. At the half-mark the twentieth century seems to be destined to go down in history as the century of confusion. And this has tremendous relevance for the pastor and his work.

## II

Natural man has always been confused. But it seems that because of our modern means of intercommunication this confusion has hardly ever been so patent, nor has it been evident on so universal a scale, nor has man ever so frankly admitted his be-

wilderment. And is this current "distress of nations with perplexity" probably one of the signs announcing the impending Second Coming of Christ? (Luke 21:25.) Are not the events of the past five decades with all their concomitant phenomena "*apokalyptisches Wetterleuchten*"? The entire New Testament is, of course, history *sub specie aeternitatis*. But are we always aware of the eschatological character of the New Testament dispensation? As he reaches this important milestone in the history of the world, the pastor will wish to evaluate all his work in the light of eschatology and in relation to the confusion of our age. And he will do so from two points of view.

First, the pastor will view his work as a theologian *sub specie aeternitatis*. The theologians must appear before the judgment seat of God, who judges all things, including his theology.\* The teacher, the preacher, the professor, will joyfully give an account of his proclamation if it is always eschatologically orientated. For what else is our theology but God's gracious proclamation that there is no judgment for the believer? (John 5:24.) Is our dogmatic labor not the affirmation that in the light of eschatology the theological confusion must disappear completely and finally? Three examples will illustrate the significance of viewing our theology eschatologically.

There is much confusion today concerning the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Dialectical theology maintains that any message from God to man, including the proclamation of His judgments, is a condescension and revelation of God and therefore the Gospel. From this viewpoint the Law is said to be man's response to God's demands, *des Menschen Antwort auf Gottes Anspruch*. No less confusion is caused by modern antinomianism and its false antithesis. The former will not permit the preaching of the Law to the Christian according to the old man, and the latter maintains that the preaching of the Law in its so-called third use is a positive element in sanctification. In view of this

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\* The signers of the Book of Concord viewed their labors eschatologically when they stated that the Lutheran Confessions were published by them "in the *sight of God* and of all Christendom . . . to those now living and to those who shall come after us," and "with intrepid hearts" they joyously looked forward to the Second Coming of their Lord (*Trigl.*, 1103).

confusion we must maintain that the Law is the message announcing man's separation from God and God's wrath upon man. It is *Deus propter peccata damnans*. The Gospel is *Deus propter Christum absolvens*. The Gospel is not a continuation of the Law, as modern theology holds. Law and Gospel are not two concentric circles. They are completely diametrical to each other. To be under the Law means to be under the curse and tyranny of the Law, under the verdict of God. To be under the Gospel means that the Law with its tyrannical power is completely and finally devoured. Where the Law reigns, there can be no Gospel, and where the Gospel rules, there can be no Law. The current mingling of Law and Gospel is due in part to this, that men do not take eschatology seriously. For where is this distinction brought into focus so sharply as in eschatology? On Judgment Day all men will hear for the last time the proper distinction between the two. Christ will say to those on His left: "Depart from Me!" and the Law in its awful and final meaning will forever be fulfilled in them. But to those on His right He will declare: "Come, ye blessed!"—the Gospel in all its fullness will forever resolve the tensions in the Christian who because of his old man in this life is *justus et simul peccator*, for there he will be forever free from the threatening, condemning, and driving force of the Law and in perfect liberty will serve God throughout eternity for Christ's sake. The preaching of Law and Gospel in their proper distinction is always an "eschatological act."

Eschatology will also remove the current confusion regarding both the essence and the function of the Church. In this life the hypocrites mingle in outward association with the believers, and it seems difficult always to maintain the distinction between the Church *proprie* and *largiter dicta*, the so-called "visible" and "invisible" Church. But the eye of faith perceives the Church eschatologically and sees her as the spotless bride of Christ, as the communion of saints, not as a heterogeneous body of believers and nominal Christians, as a *corpus mixtum*. From the viewpoint of eschatology the Christian will also view correctly the functions of both Church and State and his relation to each as he lives in both realms. In the light of the Judgment we see that the function of the Church is to prepare men for Christ's Second Coming, by freeing them from the tyrannical power of sin, death, and the devil.

The State, however, has been ordained by God to function as a check on this tyrannical power until His coming. Theological confusion ensues every time when men confound the specific functions of each realm and assign to the Church the work of the State or vice versa. Eschatology assigns to each estate its proper function.

The means of grace may also take on a fuller meaning if considered *sub specie aeternitatis*. In Lutheran theology the Word and the Sacraments are really the means which bring God's grace to man. The means of grace may therefore be called "realized eschatology." Through the Gospel the Holy Spirit offers and conveys to us all the treasures of God's grace. We possess now the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ, and through the Gospel we are translated even now into the kingdom of Christ, sitting with Him now in heavenly places. This is forcefully brought home to us in the "visible word." In Baptism we are born again, and this new birth has completely changed the old order. By nature we exist according to the old maxim: In the midst of life we are surrounded by death. Baptism inverts this order, so that now in the midst of death we are surrounded by life. Since our Baptism we no longer go from birth to death, but from death to life everlasting according to body and soul. In the Lord's Supper we receive forgiveness, and where there is forgiveness, there *is* life and salvation. At every Communion we show forth the death of Christ in the light of His *coming*, for, as Loehe said very aptly: Every Communion hymn is also an eschatological hymn. Modern theology does not take seriously the means of grace nor eschatology and therefore cannot solve the paradox of eschatology as a "*Jetzt und noch nicht*." But when we really believe that in and through the Gospel we now possess everything, then the confusion is removed and the "already and not yet" of eschatology is only the distinction between faith and sight: by faith possessing it as though it were already a visible reality.

Thus eschatology will give our entire theology a joyous, hopeful, rich, and meaningful content. Our preaching *sub specie aeternitatis* is not a morbid or terrifying proclamation, but one which enables men to lift up their heads with joyful anticipation.

Second, at this important milestone in the history of the world

the Church, and the pastor particularly, must view mission work in the light of eternity. In the light of eschatology the challenge to the Christian Church is tremendous: the time is fleeting; the fields are white; the doors are open; the opportunities and facilities for mission work on a global scale have been provided by God as never before; the Lord will soon return and require an accounting; the day of grace will soon expire. And as the pastor views his mission work eschatologically, he will not think of his work so much as that of "a dying man preaching to dying men," but rather as a living man speaking to men destined for life with God forever.

As this theological journal begins its ninety-sixth year,\* the Editorial Staff is determined to continue the motto which has adorned its masthead for almost a century, namely, that a preacher must not only lead his flock to the green pastures of God's Word, but also protect the sheep against the attacks of the ravenous wolves.—The management of Concordia Publishing House will make such changes in the outward appearances of our journal as will increase its attractiveness. The Editorial Committee will at all times give its best thought and effort to make the pages of this journal as meaningful as possible, realizing that the Lord will judge also this theological work, and this labor of love must therefore be performed *sub specie aeternitatis*. F. E. MAYER

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\* In 1930 the following journals published by the "Missouri Synod" were merged into the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY: *Lehre und Wehre*, 1855—1929 (75 volumes); *Theological Quarterly*, 1897—1920, and *Theological Monthly*, 1920—1929 (a total of 33 volumes); *Magazin fuer Ev.-Lutherische Homiletik*, 1877—1929 (53 volumes).

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