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The Gospel and the Urban Crisis

ARTHUR SIMON

The urban crisis compels us to reexamine the gospel. It gives the lie to our arrogant supposition that we proclaim the gospel in all its truth and purity. It shows that what we have passed along as pure gospel is really the gospel shaped by cultural accretions. Furthermore, the urban crisis prompts us to confess that the gospel is not believed and understood faithfully when it is viewed as a message detached from its worldly surroundings, because the gospel encompasses a way of life that comprehends in one seamless robe the words that express the good news as well as actions that give substance to the words.

First, let us disabuse ourselves of any notion that the gospel for the city is a different gospel, as if one gospel were suitable for the church as a whole, but that certain "problem areas" of the city present us with a special situation and therefore require a special gospel. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. A gospel that is not authentic in the slums is not authentic in the suburbs either.

Second, we should acknowledge that in the city the church's proclamation has been put to a new and demanding test, which now requires not a change in the gospel but a change in what we have understood and proclaimed as the gospel. This requirement should not surprise us, for concrete events and circumstances often intrude to make us reassess what we believe—otherwise we drift into a world of un-

reality and self-deception. The urban crisis has in fact exposed such a drift on the part of the church, and so it is necessary that our understanding of the gospel be placed under the scrutiny of the gospel. In this sense the city also is God's gift, because it has compelled us to call our assumptions into question and to understand the gospel anew.

When I speak of the urban crisis, I mean specifically the problem of *racism*, which more and more polarizes blacks and whites into two separate and unequal societies, and the problem of *poverty*, which has made expanding sections of our cities the dumping grounds for too many rejected people. The fact that these problems constitute the nation's foremost domestic crisis coincides remarkably with the church's most impressive failure in America—its inability to flourish and express its life convincingly in the nation's slums and ghettos. The city of course is much more than its slums and ghettos; but of all the issues that face the city and that haunt the church as it takes shape in the city, poverty and racism are the key ones today. They are the touchstones. Not only does the health and sanity of America depend to a great extent on our national willingness or unwillingness to deal with them, but poverty and racism undermine the church's credibility as the gospel's spokesman. When the gospel is understood in such a way that it allows the church to desert the inner city and to justify its negligence toward those whom society has consistently exploited, that is

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clearly an understanding based on profoundly erroneous assumptions.

A strategic clue to the church's shameful record in the city, a clue that underscores the need to reappraise our understanding of the gospel, is the church's success theology. This is a theology of glory that flourishes side by side with a theology of the cross, even though these two theologies have nothing in common. They ordinarily exist together in our parishes without the slightest hint that there is any contradiction between the two, and so they are almost universally accepted as part and parcel of the same theology, which in fact they are not.

As I have explained in more detail elsewhere,¹ this success theology undergirds our commitment as an ecclesiastical institution to the values of the white middle class. Although our success theology is not carefully articulated, it employs a wide range of spoken or unspoken ideas that have a certain cohesion:

The church's goal as an institution is to grow. Stewardship means giving money to the church. Loyalty to the church is loyalty to our Lord. The Kingdom is being built when we build churches. We activate Christians when we draw them away from the world to serve on church committees. The church's job is to save souls, not meddle in politics. The church has optional interests such as world relief and social welfare. Religion is a separate compartment of life, and the church means to enlarge that compartment.²

Stated so baldly, these are premises most of us would find repulsive, in whole or in part. But I think it can be shown that time

¹ *Faces of Poverty* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966); Macmillan paperback, 1968.

² Adapted from *ibid.*, p. 112.

after time it is our success theology rather than a theology of the cross that determines major decisions in the church. Consequently this turned-inward, self-serving theology must be considered dominant in the church.

How can this be? How can two theologies diametrically opposed to each other be uncritically brought together?

The answer is that what I have called our success theology is first of all a morphological error. It has to do with the form and structure, the life-style and direction of an institution, rather than with its written theology, and thus with things that are usually (and incorrectly) considered nontheological. Consequently congregations decide how to organize, build, spend money, and do all sorts of things on the basis of values that often have little or no relationship to the theology of the cross, which they also honor. But then the theological question has already collapsed, because when the organizational life of a congregation (or a denomination) is based on values which violate the church's authentic theological perspective, that perspective is not being kept in focus. Words which articulate such a theology no longer mean what they should mean because they are now understood in a way that does not contradict the church's success-mindedness. In other words, when the shape of the church reflects a misunderstanding of the gospel, theology tags along.

Let me document the consequences of this by discussing the doctrine of justification as it is illuminated by our stance toward racism and poverty. Here contradictions appear between what we say we believe and what we do believe that are so fundamental as to require explanation.

First, we judge others. I am disturbed

by the extent to which professing Christians mimic the world in passing judgment on poor people and black people. These are only a few of the things we all have heard from the saints in our parishes:

The poor are lazy. They could find plenty of jobs if they really wanted to. . . . Why don't they move out of the slums—or at least clean up? . . . People on welfare are determined to freeload off the public. . . . Unwed mothers have more children in order to increase welfare allotments. . . . Negroes must come up to our standards first. They should lift themselves by their own bootstraps, as other ethnic groups have done.

Not only are such judgments based on a wholly inaccurate assessment of others and of circumstances that make life oppressive for them—which is bad enough—but they constitute a clear violation of justification by grace. The good news that we are justified by God's grace allows no room for pronouncing judgment upon others and counting them less worthy than ourselves. Instead it contains an acknowledgment that there is no difference because all have sinned. It also contains a confession that whatever standing we have with God depends on a free gift from Him, not on anything we have done. Consequently there is no basis for the subtle or not-so-subtle sense of superiority which leads us to place groundless judgments on the black and the poor of our land.

Second, we justify ourselves. This is the inescapable counterpart of judging others. When we insist that the black man or the poor man hustle and make it up the economic ladder the hard way, we not only ignore the enormous advantages we have had but we indulge in some generous back-patting. Our education, our personal

integrity, our industry, and so forth are taken as fitting marks of self-made men, accomplishments that help justify our existence. However, if God's grace is truly determinative for us,

then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law. (Rom. 3:27-28)

The increasing use of the term "law and order"—sometimes out of genuine fear, often as a thinly veiled symbol of racial hostility, and usually as a substitute for the pursuit of justice—is surely an exercise in self-justification. Having secured much, we become protective, possessive, and insensitive toward those who cannot share in our abundance. Tired of being blamed for our injustices, we determine to exact obedience from any who challenge the present arrangement. The President's Commission on Civil Disorders concluded that white America is guilty of racism, but most churchgoers, like most other Americans, resent the charge and become defensive (self-justifying). Clearly the gospel has other prescriptions for dealing with injustice and guilt.

Some months ago after an intense discussion between members of our interracial parish on Manhattan's Lower East Side and members of a suburban parish, one of the adults from our congregation said about the suburbanites: "Why do they have to be so defensive? Don't they believe in the forgiveness of sins? If you believe in forgiveness, you don't need to make excuses."

Third, we do not respond in love. I need not recount here the familiar story of how our denomination (along with others)

physically abandoned the slums and ghettos, and fled to suburban refuges where we could sustain ourselves in more congenial surroundings. Removed from the poor and the black, we grow protective of our way of life. We perpetuate all-white neighborhoods, insuring that black people will remain locked up in ghettos. Nor are we ready to contribute extra tax dollars to help eliminate the slums and the blight of poverty in our land — surely an unholy response from the richest people in earth's history. Let me underscore here that at stake is the Christian comprehension of God's grace in Jesus Christ. The gospel impresses on us that those who are forgiven much love much. One can only conclude, therefore, that our failure to love much means that we are not profoundly impressed by the announcement that we are forgiven.

I have sketched all too briefly what seems to be a colossal exercise in self-justification and an extensive rejection of justification by grace within the church.

One is tempted to comment at this point that the church in every age suffers from non-Christian influences and that what is needed is more preaching of the gospel and better application of the gospel. No doubt. But that fails utterly to come to terms with what should now be seen as a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel. That misunderstanding encompasses two things:

1. a misplaced preoccupation with the verbalized form of the gospel;
2. an assumption that the gospel can be proclaimed in abstraction, detached from human realities.

Only by taking into account these two misrepresentations can we sufficiently ex-

plain how a success theology can flourish unchallenged in a denomination that honors a theology of the cross. Only these two faulty assumptions enable us to comprehend how patterns of congregational life can be extensively molded by values that are consistent with success-mindedness but not with the mind of Christ. Without acknowledging these fundamental aberrations, we cannot adequately account for the impotence of the church vis-à-vis the urban crisis and its quiet acceptance of justification by works.

In contrast to these aberrations, the gospel itself comes as the good news that God's forgiveness in Christ sets us free from a self-justifying existence and calls us to a way of life in which the reality of His grace is celebrated in our worldly surroundings. The gospel is good news for the *world, this world*, and is addressed to people who are caught up in human struggles. The gospel must either be understood and celebrated from within these worldly struggles or it is not rightly understood and celebrated. Our great mistake has been to separate the gospel from our worldly struggles and to understand it as an eternal, spiritual teaching that remains aloof and pure from age to age. Consequently it is possible for us to treat justification by grace as a general religious truth to be accepted — while we justify ourselves and judge others when confronted concretely with aspects of racism and poverty. Nevertheless it is only in such concrete tests that justification by grace is either believed or not believed. To believe it only as a generality is not to believe it at all.

St. Paul knew this to be the case. When he spoke of self-justification, he did so

quite particularly in terms of things that imprisoned people in his day — Jewish legalism, Jewish pride in an ancient, superior revelation, and Gentile obeisance to specious values (Romans 1—3). We are faithful to Paul and the gospel not when we repeat his words as if no new conditions prevailed, but when the choice between self-justifying and grace-justifying ways of life is spelled out in terms of the things that threaten and imprison people now. Put in other words, one must speak of God's will and our disobedience (the law) in terms of concrete issues and struggles of human life today; otherwise we are boxing thin air (to use Paul's image), and the gospel comes not as a freeing power but as a teaching that has to do only with "religion."

Consistent with an inclination to abstract the gospel from concrete realities is the tendency within the Western church to intellectualize the faith—a tendency that receives a powerful impetus within our own church body by an impulse to give undue weight to the correct verbalization of the gospel. We have not carefully observed that words, as symbols, are given substance by human actions and attitudes. To assert, for example, that faith produces deeds of love says something. But it also says something — perhaps something a good deal more specific — when a congregation spends immense sums on its own buildings and gathers only a pittance for a hungry world. Its leaders are saying something when they quietly submit to a pattern of structural racism (for example, a white neighborhood) without even raising blunt questions. Thus the actions and inactions of a congregation, placed side by side with the verbal announcement, erode

the intended meaning of that announcement. Nevertheless it is widely assumed that the gospel leaves these matters up to individual preferences.

The situation I describe coincides with what historians have designated as a deep-rooted streak of "quietism" within the Lutheran Church, although it is by no means confined to that group. Quietism is the tradition that the church's task is to convert people and minister to their "spiritual" needs, but not to engage in social or political issues—trusting regenerated people to make their own ethical applications in the world. This point of view is based on a partial truth that in fact distorts the biblical understanding of man in society. It encourages people to restrict their Christian understanding to matters of personal piety and thus turn much of life over to values that have group sanction but no biblical norms to challenge or inform them. One of its monumental failures was the German church's widespread silence during the rule of the Nazis while 6 million Jews were exterminated.

Now it is all too clear that far from keeping aloof from politics the churches in Germany were deeply involved in politics, but involved on the wrong side. Their silence was accepted as permission to carry on these atrocities.

In defense it must be said that when Lutherans have argued that the church should keep out of social and political issues, they have indeed assumed the development of Christian virtues. But the virtues that are most highly honored in Lutheran congregations are personal virtues such as obedience, chastity, and caring for the aged. They are not the virtues that call an Adolph Hitler or a Joseph McCarthy

to account. Nor do they challenge a social order that sustains slavery or condones vicious discrimination against black Americans or devastates a tiny Asian nation. Yet not to permit the Word to speak to these situations is to be incapable of applying the parable of the Good Samaritan to the modern world, and thus to limit the gospel to a benign, grandmotherly irrelevance. We can see, then, that when well-meaning attempts to let the gospel address human realities are limited to highly individualistic concerns, "reality" is severely circumscribed and the gospel greatly restricted. In such a context the church's success theology and our self-justifying aloofness from poverty and racism can flourish with little fear of accountability.

During a panel discussion some time ago a Lutheran clergyman took sharp issue with me regarding the church's involvement in the civil rights struggle. He said that racism within the church should be handled as a matter of pastoral admonition to the guilty individual. "If anyone in my congregation is oppressing a Negro, believe me, I'm going to get after him." The comment was utterly sincere, but it overlooked the fact that more than personal prejudice is involved. Every white American and consequently every white Lutheran lives in a state of oppression against blacks, because whites are automatically on the side of those who benefit from generations of exploitation. To fail to challenge this arrangement, therefore, nourishes racism within the church. To deal with racism only on the level of person-to-person prejudice and not on the structural level, where it really does the damage, gives us the illusion of blamelessness. But that hinders us from realizing that God also speaks to

the evils of social injustice. It likewise prevents us from finding authentic freedom from our guilt, because we are justifying a sin that we need to confess.

The fate of the Kretzmann report provides another piece of documentation.³ In its 1965 Detroit convention The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod received from Dr. Martin L. Kretzmann a commissioned report. It was a lucid presentation of the church's responsibility for involvement in the world, as the gospel commends. Here and there persons within the church caught Dr. Kretzmann's vision and began to understand the Word of God anew. This gain should not be underestimated. I do not believe, however, that his report was widely understood; to the extent that it was, it frequently became an embarrassment to church leaders. At any rate, it is my strong impression that the main consequence the report had was to inspire a new set of terms. Suddenly, for example, one read everywhere in our publications that "the church is mission" — although we continued to do the same things as before. New jargon allowed us to bypass the content of the report — and in fact use it to bolster precisely the sort of activities which the report criticized. The assumption seemed to be that giving things a different name would make them what they were named. But as Adam knew, a cow by any other name is still a cow, and a congregation that continues to perpetuate an outlook that is curved in upon itself is not convincingly "in mission," no matter how loudly it says so.

The sidetracking of the Kretzmann report illustrates how far from ready we are

³ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Convention Workbook*, 1965, pp. 113—40.

to abandon our success theology in order to live by the gospel, which is a gospel of involvement; and it likewise illustrates how ready we are to think that God's Word is spoken when we verbalize it in a certain way, no matter how emptied of meaning those words may have become.

If my sketchy analysis here is essentially accurate, if it is true that when put to the test of the urban crisis we are found to be working with faulty assumptions concerning the gospel, then a great many other privileged viewpoints will have to be reconsidered, for example, eschatology. Our otherworldliness, which turns out to be a worldly accommodation to the values of an affluent society, will have to be changed in the light of our Lord's assessment that he who truly anticipates His return feeds the hungry, visits prisoners, and spends his life in similar missions for the deprived.

Our relationship to other Christians will have to be reconsidered. With few exceptions inner-city congregations have found working within Synod's denominational restrictions to be an unacceptable burden, out of character with the New Testament's admonition that we preserve the unity which the Holy Spirit gives. What does a Lutheran pastor do, for example, when he discovers a closer, more evangelical understanding of the gospel among neighboring Roman Catholic priests than he finds among clergymen within his own denomination? What does it mean when a Lutheran and a non-Lutheran congregation find their way to one another through a common concern, born of the gospel, to minister to the community in which their one Lord has placed them? If it is true that we have engaged in a misplaced preoccupation with the correct verbalization

of the gospel, if we have done so in order to pursue a purity that has eluded us precisely because word-symbols are inescapably attached to attitudes and actions that clothe them in flesh and blood—then we are in a different contest. Then it is no longer permissible to consider all questions of relating to other Christians only from the standpoint of theological semantics. I say this not in any sense to disparage the importance of theological precision or the pursuit of a common understanding of the gospel. Quite the opposite. I believe a common understanding is possible only when the theological task is not misguided by following assumptions that must now be viewed as obstructions to the gospel.

It is appropriate to suggest also that a re-examination of the gospel will require a new look at our theological training program. The very location of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, may say a great deal about our theological tradition. A parklike campus in suburban Clayton has the effect of sealing some students off from the world which they have chosen to ignore. It may be, however, that given a little time the physical realities of the urban crisis will catch up to Concordia.

Meanwhile there are a great many imaginative ways in which lay and clerical leadership in the church could be developed by the seminary to conform more consistently to the gospel and to reflect more perceptively the world to which the gospel is now addressed.

I used to think that our understanding of the gospel was essentially in order if only we applied it more faithfully. Not any more. I am convinced that our understanding of the gospel has led us astray in some critical matters and is crying for

correction, for assumptions that are biblically grounded—even at the risk that this might reveal more fundamental agreement across denominational lines than it would produce within our own denomination. The situation is not that our presentation of the gospel has been too orthodox, but rather that it has not been orthodox enough, not catholic enough, not open enough to the correctives of the gospel and to the whole biblical understanding of man's life and God's salvation.

Too often people within and outside the church are confronted with false alternatives. One option reflects a debt to American optimism. It urges the church toward secular involvement without show-

ing a comparable commitment to that which calls the church into being and nourishes its life as a community of believers. The alternative is a theology that calls people away from involvement so that they may cherish themselves as a Christian community. One is as foreign to the gospel as the other. Both indulge in the same unwarranted antagonism between sacred and secular. Seven years in the swirl of the urban crisis have convinced me that neither theology has enough to offer. Neither do we unless we are willing to be remolded by the gospel and learn to celebrate it in a way that links the breaking of bread to the stress and pain and joy of our world.