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The Mission on Which We Are Sent

PAUL E. JACOBS

The Affirmations on the Mission of the Church which The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod adopted at the Detroit convention in 1965 are part of the evidence of the ongoing struggle of one part of the church to understand what and why the church is in the world. The struggle has not been easy nor has it been without conflict. The affirmations call us to see the church's mission in terms of people rather than church structures. They compel us to wrestle with the standards of comfort and convenience by which we continually serve ourselves. They plead with us to allow our Lord to use us to bring His help and healing to men. So the affirmations state that the church is God's mission and that this mission is not an optional activity but the very life concern of all of us for all men whoever and wherever they are. The affirmations summon us to come out of isolation behind church walls and behind purity of doctrine so that we may communicate anew the truth of the Gospel and confess Christ boldly and lovingly. The affirmations underscore the mission of God's people as Christ's mission to the whole society, expressing Christ's compassion in seeking God's fatherly will for all who are discriminated against and oppressed by reason of race, class, creed, or other unwarranted distinctions, since all come from the Father's creating hand and since His

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Son's nail-pierced hands reach out to all in love. The church has a mission not only to the whole world but also to the whole man, to each individual, and that not only spiritually but physically.

Such are the affirmations, reminding us that the church is here not just to serve its members who come to be served, but that the church — you and I — is primarily a serving people and that whatever the people do is to be done in Christ, and so is to reflect the Christ whose we are. All these affirmations remind us that the church's mission is not just to faraway places to which we send someone while we sit comfortably amid material plenty and think that we fulfill our Lord's commission by placing money on the offering plate. Nor will they permit us to think that we have complied with our Lord's will by serving on an evangelism or a missions committee calling on prospective members whom we may need to help pay the bills. No, the affirmations adopted at Detroit summon us to face up to our Lord as He says to each of us: "I send you forth."

There is a price tag on this mission, and the price is not established only in terms of money, although that amount is considerable. It is far costlier than that, for it means risking life in seeking flesh and blood people for Christ, facing hostility and even violence. Some of the cost of the mission on which we are sent as His church is spelled out when our Lord says: "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves." (Matt. 10:16)

There is risk involved, possibly becom-

ing a matter of life or death, when we take seriously our Lord and the mission on which He sends us. Isn't this what our Lord said: "Whoever will save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it"? (Matt. 16:25). We are called, then, to take Him at His word, knowing that His word is just as reliable as He Himself is. Take Him at His word and you take Him. But then let us remember that He dares to accept everything from a drafty, dirty stable to a criminal's cross as the lone outcast of heaven and earth. He risked everything, this Lord of all, to serve us all. He came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. The Lord of all became the servant to all and for all, even to washing the feet of His disciples — a Judas who would betray Him, a Thomas who would doubt Him, a Peter who would deny Him. Shall we not perform even the lowest and most menial task for one another, remembering that what we do we do it to Him?

Taking our Lord's mission seriously means that we deal with people as our Lord's brothers, even those who are not yet in the fellowship of the faith. They, too, are His brothers even though they know Him not, for He is the Brother of all, and He died for all. He said: "As much as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren" — the hungry, the sick, the naked, and the imprisoned — "you did it to Me," whether that one be a Judas whose feet He washed or a bleeding, desolate man along the Jericho road. So the servant Lord entrusts His church with a servant task to gather a broken world that it may be redeemed from its evil and restored as His world made whole and

made the dwelling place of righteousness. Each of His body, the church, is a servant and not a master. We are here as a colony of heaven to show others the way life is really lived under God through His Son, Jesus Christ. We are not a cloister gathered for our own comfort. There will be criticism when you get involved, criticism when ways of reaching out to people and meeting their needs run up against the traditional ecclesiastical way of doing things. So let it be: "He eats with tax collectors and sinners," but only so may salvation come to this house or that. In the words of a contemporary hymn, written by W. Harry Krieger for the Detroit convention of our Synod: "If thou bleed not, thou canst bless not."

In this kind of life-and-death situation we begin to understand better what it means to be justified through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Since it is God with whom we deal and before whose throne we must stand, and since He has forgiven us out of His fatherly heart for Jesus' sake, we need no longer fear what man can do to us. It means that we leave the world's way, its judgments, its sense of values, and seek instead that which pleases God, being obedient to His Word, committing ourselves daily to Him, knowing that He will be with us. By so trusting our Lord Jesus Christ we live what we sing:

And take they our life,
Goods, fame, child, and wife,
Let these all be gone,
They yet have nothing won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.

So we turn from the world's way of killing one another with words and deeds, and we start dying for one another for the sake of Him who died for all and rose again as

Lord over all, even the last enemy, our death.

We must not belittle the primacy of the Gospel for men and for their salvation. The good news of what God in His grace has done in Jesus Christ is for all people everywhere. We have been given the divine mandate to make known the Gospel of the forgiveness of God in Christ to the hundreds of millions who have never heard it. But to get that hearing for the Gospel today, the church must also show that she really cares for men; she must radiate a Christlikeness in all of her relationships. We dare not restrict the mission only to speaking the Gospel and to dealing only with the spiritual side of man, even if such a thing were possible and if man could be sliced up that way. Nor can we think that we do our Lord's will most profoundly when we verbalize the Gospel and conclude that it is less important to bring help and hope to the poor, the hungry, and the naked in their distress. To think and to act that way is to deny what our Lord tells us to do individually as well as corporately. The "go therefore and make disciples of all nations" is addressed to us, but so is this word of His: "I was hungry, and you gave Me food." You see, we are called to minister to people, all kinds of people, the affluent and the poverty-racked, the well-dressed and the bearded, the bare-foot dropouts. Our task as His disciples, as the church, is, in Martin Luther's words, to "profess the Gospel with hand and mouth." What the world needs is the incursion of more holy men into unholy places. Our Lord is summoning us to go forth with a new sense of caring, demonstrating that the church is concerned about what is happening and that she is really

willing to give herself up. By that strategy she will gain a new and fresh hearing for the Gospel.

We must not get hung up on an either-or dilemma: either we speak the Gospel *or* we do it, as if verbalizing the Gospel stood in opposition to living the Gospel in terms of love and compassion and helpfulness. It is always both-and: *both* to speak the good Word *and* obey it for the sake of Him who loves us and whom we own as our Lord. We speak His Word because we believe it; and we demonstrate our believing by our obedience to it. How can it be otherwise without either falsifying or making our claim incredible? To speak the good news that Christ is risen, that sin is forgiven and death is done and that life can be whole again, and then not to live this good news in seeking the good of others is to make the message unbelievable. On the other hand, to feed the hungry, to give the cup of cold water in all of its forms without speaking the Word that truly frees, that also is to falsify the Gospel into another gospel, a gospel of works which is not *the* Gospel.

It is not easy to live this life under Him in His kingdom in a day when you are beset by the pressures of prejudice or when the forces in the community demand conformity to the views of the majority. It is not easy to take your stand against the popular, the convenient, the comfortable. It is much more pleasant and safe to go with the crowd. Yet the joy that is born of the Gospel summons us to live not by constraint or rules or by traditions which would force all into the same mold, thus preserving the status quo. No man compels your conscience. Only God does. Christ is Lord, and there is no other. The

Gospel empowers us now to live responsibly to God in seeking the good of men without attention to what happens to us here, since we are the Father's children whom Christ will not disown and whom He is not ashamed to call His brethren. Luther caught this joy of the Gospel, a joy that is free from the opinions of men, free from rules that would tyrannize and enslave, when he said: "The Christian is the most free lord of all, subject to none." Yet it is not a freedom of irresponsibility or of selfish pleasure. It is the joyous freedom of service, a freedom that is constrained by the love of Christ, so that Luther also said: "A Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

It is right here that we are all most vulnerable. It is in the obedience of faith demonstrated in our living that we stumble and fall most frequently. We are great in conceptualizing the faith, spelling it out in doctrinal formulations, rehearsing it over and over again in sermonic essays, and then thinking that that is it. You remember the definition of faith in *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943) on page 91, question 103: "What do you mean when you confess, 'I believe in God'? I mean that I *know*, and *accept as true*, what the Bible says of God and *trust in Him* and *rely on Him* with firm confidence." We usually do an excellent job on the knowledge and the assent aspects of faith, but we are often terribly short on the *fiducia*—on trusting Him and betting our life that what He says is true in terms of our acting on it. We have all kinds of gaps today, but the most deadly gap of all for the church is the "performance gap." We need to recall

what our Lord said: "Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but He who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 7:21)

Many young people, more than we like to admit, have become disillusioned with the church because of this gap. They see so many in the church regarding this most holy faith as a security blanket for their own comfort instead of using it as the power to be what God has summoned them to be—His people who live life on His terms. Young people have become dissatisfied with the Christians who look upon the church as a comfortable island rather than as a launching pad. They want it to be a fellowship that seeks to help people by dealing with the great social evils which grind and tyrannize people. Young people in high school and college know more about today's problems than many of our older persons do. They are tired of always only talking about these problems. They want to do something—and we provide no channels for them. We think they are not ready because at that age we were not and even at our present age perhaps still are not ready. We have been long on *credo* but terribly short on *ergo*. We are great on "I believe" but so utterly weak on "therefore" in terms of living the faith. The result is that the amazing message of the Gospel is unbelievable because of unbelievable people who proclaim it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran martyr who was killed by the Nazis in 1945, touched a very sore spot for many Christians when he wrote with irony: "The upshot of it all is that my only duty as a Christian is to leave the world for an hour or so on a Sunday morn-

ing and go to church to be assured that my sins are all forgiven." This is what he meant by "cheap grace."

Abbé Georges Michonneau, a French Roman Catholic parish priest, asks these questions, which, I am sure, are questions that can be asked of most of our parishes: "What is the worth, as Christians, of this crowd that we see in church? Do they love one another? Are they a unified element in a community? Do they even know one another? Once out of the church, what ideas will they exchange? What influence on one another will they have? Do they have the idea of belonging to one and the same living body? Of being members of one another? Does the ceremony they have just come from uniting their hearts and minds in one identical hope and thought? Do they go out with the burning desire of making Christ fill their lives and of seeing Him reign in their environment? Did they come to fulfill an obligation for their own salvation, or did they come to strengthen and feed a life which they want to spread? What kind of an example are they going to be to the great mass of indifferent souls among whom they live? Will they be a family recognized for its charity, loyalty, faith in Christ, confidence, joy, courage under hardships? Or will they be pretty much like everyone else around them, except for a weekly habit peculiar to them? When others look at this band of the faithful, will they have a mind to become Christian?"

It is in this area of risk, of obedience, of *fiducia* that today's pastor finds himself in a fearful dilemma. Perhaps this is the reason why some are leaving the parish ministry or why some seminary students seek years of further study or turn to spe-

cialized ministries. They are torn by the tension of being obedient to the Lord or pleasing a parish, of being in favor with Him or coming into disfavor with the congregation by preaching what is contrary to its political or sociological inheritance.

Helmut Thielicke is right when he traces the weakness of the American pulpit to the doors of clergymen paid by the congregation who may thus become, in a sense, the church's kept men. Because the congregation pays his salary, he is under pressure to preach what the congregation wants to hear. If he attempts to do otherwise and to lay on the hearts of the people what the will of the Lord is, he will suffer as Paul Gerhardt suffered. But he will then be an authentic, credible person whose message will be recognized as authentic and believable. Gerhardt wrote:

Commit whatever grieves thee
Into the gracious hands
Of Him who never leaves thee,
Who heaven and earth commands.
Who points the clouds their courses,
Whom winds and waves obey,
He will direct thy footsteps
And find for thee a way.

Then hope, my feeble spirit,
And be thou undismayed;
God helps in every trial
And makes thee unafraid.
Await His time with patience,
Then shall thine eyes behold
The sun of joy and gladness
His brightest beams unfold.

Arise, my soul, and banish
Thy anguish and thy care.
Away with thoughts that sadden
And heart and mind ensnare!
Thou art not lord and master
Of thine own destiny;

Enthroned in highest heaven
God rules in equity. (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 520, 1, 6, 7)

He put it that way in another hymn:

Why should cross and trial grieve me?
Christ is near With His cheer;
Never will He leave me.
Who can rob me of the heaven
That God's Son For my own
To my faith hath given? (*TLH*, 523, 1)

In still another hymn he declares boldly and confidently:

If God Himself be for me,
I may a host defy;
For when I pray, before me
My foes, confounded fly.
If Christ, my Head and Master,
Befriend me from above,
What foe or what disaster
Can drive me from His love? (*TLH*, 528, 1)

Gerhardt wrote this hymn after he had been driven from his pulpit because of his confessional loyalty. Though his wife and children were hungry and without a home, he, sustained by a buoyant faith, could join St. Paul in saying: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you" (2 Cor. 4:8-12). He learned obedience through suffering, which is the way of our Lord and the way we all must tread to be faithful. This is what we are summoned to be — faithful — not

clever or brilliant or successful or infallible. We can be wrong, we may make mistakes, we can be guilty of poor judgment, and we can do some very stupid things. But always He forgives us when we call upon His mercy. Our faithful response is that what we do for the love of Him who loves us and who gave Himself for us.

My brothers, because God has spoken His good news to us in Jesus Christ and for His sake has declared us free from sin and death, from all that makes one afraid and ashamed, therefore we now live our life to Him and for Him who died for us and rose again and is our living Lord. Because we believe in Him and rest our lives on Him, we do what we do. Let, then, the great "therefore" of the Gospel, the "therefore" of justification through faith, which is the holy dare and the divine risk of faith, ring out again in our lives. Let the conviction of our hearts in Jesus Christ be turned into convincing living. Let the hearing of the Gospel issue into the doing of it. Let this happen not for our own justification. We are justified by God's grace. Therefore, we need no longer fear what man may do to us. Therefore our concerns are centered on what concerns God. We are not hopelessly detoured by concern for stain-glassed windows and padded pews; for surplices and stoles and what kind of material they are made of; for dressing up the liturgy or simplifying it for experimental folk masses or Holy Communion according to the rubrics. All these things have their place; all may be good in themselves, but they can also be the diversionary tactics of the devil which keep us from our real task of being faithful witnesses to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Stone and stain glass, buildings and

budgets in themselves love no one. In themselves they bring no healing, no warmth, no reconciliation into human lives. God's concern is centered on man. God so loved the *world* that He gave His only-begotten Son, who was content to be born in a stable and die a most wretched death as a criminal executed on a cross to bring us the life of God that doesn't end. God is for man! Are we? Or are we afraid to become involved for fear that we might become contaminated or for fear of what might happen to us? To possess the treasure of the Gospel, to be claimed by our Lord Jesus Christ as one of His very own in whom He lives and through whom He would move, means that we cry out for men for God's sake so that men may have the joy we possess. During the days of Hitler, when the Jews of Germany and in Nazi-held lands were a people marked for death, Bonhoeffer said: "No man has a right to chant Gregorian unless he has first cried out for the Jew." Today in this latter part of the 20th century we can rephrase this and say that no Christian has the right to a beautiful church building for his own religious comfort and enjoyment unless he has first cried out for the underprivileged, the oppressed, the hungry, the naked, and

sought to care for them with the love and the compassion of the Son of God. You can afford so to cry and so to live since you already have a place in the Father's house. Christ is your Pledge—and He is faithful. Therefore, you can afford the joy of washing feet.

Such is something of the mission on which we are sent. Such is the stance of faith and the obedience of faith. It knows failure and yet there is forgiveness. There is pain, agony, at which the flesh flinches, and misunderstanding, and yet there is joy and peace in serving our Lord. We need not fear since He knows the way and will bring us home to sit down with Him and His at the Father's table in the Father's house. Because of who He is and what He has done, because He is my Lord who has everything in hand, because His kingdom of joy and peace and love is forever and ever and ever, therefore I can lift up my heart daily to Him and say:

Thou art mine; I love and own Thee.
 Light of joy, Ne'er shall I
 From my heart dethrone Thee.
 Savior, let me soon behold Thee
 Face to face—May Thy grace
 Evermore enfold me! (TLH, 523, 8)
 Belmont, Calif.