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William Edward Hordern

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The Mission of the Church Today

William Hordern

*President Emeritus,
Lutheran Theological Seminary,
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan*

Many will wonder why we speak about the mission of the church *today*. Is not the mission of the church always the same? Is not our mission to follow Christ and present the Gospel to all who will hear? Of course, this is true. But the Gospel is not a dead thing to be presented to whom it may concern. God always speaks to particular persons and particular situations. This is why we have sermons and do not simply read the Bible. The message of Scripture has to be applied to the situation of the hearers.

Luther made this point when he said that the church is a "mouth house", not a "pen house". That is, the Gospel does not remain just a written word, it comes to life as it is spoken by living believing people to other living people. In one passage Luther says the preacher is like a carpenter:

His [sic] tool is the Word of God. Because the materials on which he works vary, he ought not always pursue the same course when he preaches. For the sake of the variety of his auditors he should sometimes console, sometimes frighten, sometimes scold, sometimes soothe, etc.¹

Luther's words apply not just to the clergy but to every Christian who attempts to express the Gospel to others. The point is that, while the Word of God is always the same, the people to whom it comes are unique and stand in unique situations. The Gospel needs to be spoken so that it meets their particular needs.

Luther gives two humorous illustrations of the failure to bring the Gospel to bear on the needs of persons. He tells of a preacher who preached a fiery sermon on the sin of hiring wet nurses. But he preached it to the poor spinning women of

his parish, none of whom could afford a wet nurse. Another pastor preached an exhortation on the need to get married in a home for invalid senior citizens.² These illustrations express Luther's concern to fit the Gospel's message to the needs of the hearers. This is why we have to ask what is the mission of the church today. We need to understand the nature of the world in which our mission is to take place.

The world to which we minister is a strange and troubled one. Politicians facing the electorate have described it as being cranky and vindictive. Reigning governments from the Communist countries to Canada's provinces have been overthrown. After the Gulf War George Bush's approval rating was nearly 90%. But in 1992 the electorate turfed him out for a relatively unknown Southern governor. The resounding defeat of the Charlottetown Accord in Canada revealed a deep discontent of the Canadian people with their political leadership.

People are fearful, frustrated and are questioning all institutions and values. This frustration often expresses itself in antagonism towards certain groups. In Europe neo-Nazi movements have risen and there is a growing antagonism towards foreigners and persons of other races. With the breakup of the Communist states, old racial and national antagonisms have resurfaced and have resulted in violence. The United States has witnessed a rebirth of racial antagonisms. Los Angeles policemen were videotaped beating a black man and a riot broke out in Los Angeles when the police were let off lightly. There has been an increase in "white supremacist" activity in Western Canada. It has involved the burning of crosses, wearing Nazi uniforms and taunting Jews, Native peoples and other races. One of its adherents shot and killed a Native person in Prince Albert.

Our Western world was overjoyed to see the fall of Communism. The economic plight in the former Soviet Union seemed to prove that the Communist economic system could not work. But today an increasing number of Canadians are asking if our free enterprise system can work. We face a recession that sees high unemployment, bankruptcies, a farm crisis and many business closures. Food banks are about the only expanding industry. We have to ask if our economic system dooms us to swing between inflation that robs us of our savings and recessions that spread poverty and unemployment?

No doubt the negative mood has been spurred on by the rigors of the recession. Statistics Canada tells us that the recession is over, but it does not seem that way to the unemployed, to Canada's farmers, to the food banks or to much of Canadian business. But there is reason to believe that the mood goes deeper than that, and will not pass away if and when we come out of the recession.

I do not pretend to be able to explain in full the reasons for this negative mood. But I can point to some things. To begin with, we are living in a time of incredibly rapid change. In this century we have seen the rise of radio, television, the aeroplane, the nuclear age, space travel, the computer age and genetic engineering. Perhaps most ages have felt that they were in times of change. It has been wisecracked that when Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden, Adam said to Eve, "We are living in a time of change." But there can be no question that in this century the change has been more rapid than ever before. I think of my parents. They grew up literally in the horse and buggy age. They lived to watch on television a man walking on the moon. No other age witnessed such change in a lifetime.

At first these technological changes seemed good. They were making life more comfortable, diseases were cured and the standard of living rose. But now we realize that our technological advances have come at a great price. Our environment has been polluted, and we are warned by scientists that our use of hydro-carbon fuels and other chemicals will lead to a warming of the climate which will cause drought in the North American farming area, flooding of areas near the oceans, and so on. The cost of pollution came home to us dramatically when we were warned that the depletion of the ozone over Canada has made it unsafe to be out in the sun. Weather forecasts now report the ozone level for each day. The sun was once seen as the source of life. A good tan was the mark of beauty and health. But now we are told that the sun is a threat to health, a killer because of what our technology has done to the ozone that protects us from the sun's ultra violet rays. It is going to be costly to overcome the pollution and it will be more costly if we do not act to overcome it.

From the time of the industrial revolution, there has been the fear that machines would replace people. For a long time

these fears seemed unwarranted. In part this was because the hours of work per week were drastically reduced. But in the present recession there has been a speeding up in the replacement of people by machines. Faced with world competition, industries have mechanized their production to meet world prices. Machines produce work cheaper than people. After each recession in this century, the percentage of unemployment has remained higher than before. Many jobs lost in this latest recession are gone forever. Is the percentage of the unemployed going to remain in double digits for the future?

The farmers of Western Canada have been buffeted by falling prices for their products. A great many have been forced to leave their farms. Each year government subsidies have been necessary to keep many of the remaining farmers from bankruptcy. The taxpayers of the country are beginning to complain about this. Farmers are wondering if their way of life is doomed.

In this century the dream has been that children will become more prosperous than their parents. This was a new dream. For most of history, people stayed in the status of life into which they were born. The best parents could hope for their children was that life would be no worse for them. But, due to the technological changes of our century, people in the so-called "first world" could look forward to being better off than before. Each generation had an affluence not dreamed of by its parents. Today, however, we are coming to terms with the realization that this has come to an end. The real income of North Americans has declined in the last decade. The earth that God created is finite, which means we cannot have unlimited continuous growth. With the costs of pollution and the replacement of people by machines, the fear is growing that our children will have a poorer, not a better, way of life.

Even more disturbing than technological change for many people has been the change in social values and practices. Very prominent is the change in political views. Around the world people who have lived in poverty and oppression for years are now rising up to demand a new order. Instead of waiting patiently for some crumbs to fall from the tables of the rich, they are demanding justice. They do not want to be the "white man's burden" and they do not want paternalism. We are

made more aware of this because Canada's aboriginal people are part of this worldwide movement.

Partly as a result of this demand for justice and rights, the relationship of male and female in our culture has undergone change. Women have taken their place in professions formerly reserved for males. The ordained ministry is an example close to home for us.

The former family structure has been radically changed. I was born into an extended family, my children were born into a nuclear family. Also there is an increased number of single parent families. Divorce has become a widespread and accepted practice. There have always been couples who lived together as common law partners. The Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at the well was an example of that. But in the past such common law arrangements were condemned by society. Such people were said to be "living in sin". But today such relationships are accepted and taken for granted. Pastors report that a large percentage of their weddings today are for couples who already have been living together for some time.

As well, homosexuals, facing much discrimination, have come out of the closet and demanded to be treated as equal human beings. They have won the right to serve in the armed forces and are struggling to serve in the church. Saskatchewan is about to join other Canadian provinces in banning discrimination against homosexuals. This has created widespread opposition. Disturbed by the nature of the opposition, the Roman Catholic Church in Saskatchewan came out in support of the proposed law.

Sexual ethics have undergone a radical change. Surveys indicate that a high percentage of teenagers have sexual intercourse on a frequent basis. Several Saskatchewan high schools are installing dispensers for condoms. Even in prime time TV we now get sexual scenes that would not have been allowed in X-rated movie theatres a few years ago. The battle over abortion divides society.

When we live in a time of such extensive and rapid change, it is inevitable that people are overwhelmed and bewildered. Many of them are lashing out to protest what they see as a breakdown in values and morals. For example, although in past times much of the violence against women was hidden, there is evidence that the violence of men against women may be

increasing with the rise of women's liberation that has brought women new dignity and rights. Certainly acts of violence such as Marc Lepine's killing of fourteen women in Montreal was inspired by this. In the United States it seemed in the sixties that a great gain had been made in racial relations. But today we are seeing ugly examples of whites inflicting violence upon blacks in their frustration over losing their former dominance over the blacks. Teenage violence against blacks has spread widely. In Canada, the rock throwing by whites at the cavalcade of unarmed indigenous people who were trying to escape Oka reveals the same mood.

Around the world the various religions have experienced reactionary movements seeking to resist change. In Islam there has been the growth of so-called fundamentalism that has created many problems. One reason given for why the United States and other countries supported Saddam Hussein for so long before the Gulf War was that they saw him as a bulwark against the fundamentalist movement in Iran and other Moslem countries. Israel has experienced many problems with conservative Jews. Similar movements have surfaced in Shintoism and Buddhism.

The North American churches have experienced a widespread uprising of members who feel called to protect their traditional values against what they see as the apostasy of their churches. Often these people are so concerned to save the church and the world from what they see as the betrayal of Christianity, that they are ready to adopt unethical means to gain their end. A good example of this was the untruthful reports by an Alberta periodical about our church's convention in Edmonton in 1991.

We have recognized for many years the problem of culture shock. Missionaries have had to deal with it. When people move into a culture radically different from that in which they were raised, it causes serious psychological problems. People are disoriented, unsure of themselves and fearful. But when change is as fast as it is today, you do not have to go abroad. Just by staying in the same place, you are subject to culture shock.

It is my thesis that the present negativism of people around the world is not just due to the present recession—although that has made it worse. It is also due to the rapid changes

with which we live. People feel bewildered. The world around them seems to be shaking and the future seems unknown and ominous. As a result, they are insecure, frightened and frustrated. They look for scapegoats to blame; somewhere there must be demonic forces responsible for those things that are frightening us. During the cold war, the Soviet Union was the demonic force for North Americans. But now it has faded into obscurity and cannot be seen as a threat. And so people are seeking for demonic forces in other areas. This results in violence against people of different races, homosexuals and others who are different.

Recently I asked a retired pastor how he was enjoying retirement. He replied, "Very much, I would not want to be in the ministry today. It is facing problems that I did not even know existed when I was ministering." Faced with all of these chaotic changes in our world, we are forced to ask, what is the mission for the church in this world of change?

First and foremost the mission of the church is to follow the command of the risen Christ to go into all the world and preach the Gospel. The Gospel is both simple and profound. It is the good news that God so loved the world that the Only Begotten Son was given so that those who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life. It is the good news that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

The Gospel message is crucial for the world of today. People, confused by change, feeling insecure and threatened, need again and again to hear the message that God loves them, accepts and forgives them. Furthermore, because the Gospel tells us that everyone needs forgiveness, we are reminded that we are not so without sin that we have the right to cast the first stone. This should prevent us from locating the demonic forces in other groups. We too are infected by them.

Jesus did not simply direct his followers to preach the Gospel, he also called them to love their neighbors as themselves, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, to visit the sick and those in prison. Jesus said that he had come to bring good news to the poor. Jesus, the friend of sinners and the outcasts, called his followers to act like he did.

Acts of love are closely linked to the preaching of the Gospel. A few years ago there was a newspaper account about a man

who was standing on the ledge of the 30th story of a building, threatening to jump. When the police asked him why he wanted to jump, he said, "Because no one loves me." The police rounded up a clergyman to help them. The clergyman leaned out a window and said to the man, "God loves you." The man jumped.

This story seems to me to be a parable. Christians are telling people that God loves them. But these are empty words unless Christians embody that love. When the church sends missionaries to foreign lands they are not content simply to preach the Gospel. They also build hospitals, provide agricultural training and in many ways help people to overcome poverty and suffering. The success of our missionary efforts owes much to this loving concern that has given embodiment to the preaching of the Gospel.

Today in Saskatchewan there have been groups organized by churches as support groups for farmers. Farmers who face a grim future need to know that there are others who care, who will sit down with them and share their pain. They need to know that there are others who attempt with them to find solutions to their problems. The church's ministry today should include the creation of support groups that will act in similar ways for the unemployed, for battered women and for others who are suffering the most under the changes of our time. We often hear today about the loss of community spirit. People feel isolated. Groups like these can restore a sense of community to those who feel isolated.

We must never forget that the church is not an organization or an institution, although the church organizes and forms institutions. Primarily, as the Lutheran confessions emphasize, the church is people. Every Christian has a mission to provide loving concern to those who are hurting today.

Ironically, it is often easier to express love for those far away than it is for those who are nearby. I am reminded of growing up in Saskatchewan. At that time the missionary movement to China was a central concern to our church. In our Sunday School classes we heard glorious stories of how the Chinese were being evangelized and brought into Christianity. We were asked to give our pennies and nickels to the cause of sending more missionaries to China.

But even as a child I saw a problem. In Dundurn, as in most Saskatchewan towns of the time, there was a Chinese cafe. It was looked down upon, and the Chinese men who ran it were always referred to contemptuously. Stories circulated about the horrible things that went on in its back room. I had a hard time understanding why it was so important to send missionaries to China while the local church had no desire to include the local Chinese. In fact, if any of them had come into our church, they would not have been welcomed. Today we know many Christians who are more concerned about loving blacks in South Africa or those on our mission fields than they are concerned with the plight of Canada's aboriginal people.

The church today has a mission to work for justice in the world, to help those both far and near who are crushed by oppression, discrimination and prejudice. It is often said that the church should not be involved in what are often called "political" questions. But such activities belong to the essence of Lutheranism. Lutheranism from the beginning spoke about the two kingdoms of God. On the one hand, there is the kingdom of the church where the Gospel is preached and God is worshipped. On the other hand, there is the kingdom of the world, the state. Both kingdoms, Lutherans emphasized, belong to God. The Christian is a member of both kingdoms and is called to serve God in both. It is not enough for the Christian to serve God in church activities; the Christian is also to serve God by acting in and through the state.

Luther said that the state can serve God by maintaining law, order and peace. Thus it provides the environment in which the church can preach the Gospel. But Luther went further. He also said that the state is an instrument through which love for the neighbor can and should be expressed. The state has resources for feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. Christians should urge it to do so. The state, said Luther, should protect the weak from the strong.

Paul Tillich used to point out that the first welfare states arose in those countries with the strongest Lutheran constituencies. He mentioned the Scandinavian countries and Germany. This was no accident, said Tillich, because Lutheran populations had been taught that they should express love to the neighbor through the state. The welfare state, when

providing health care, unemployment insurance, old age security and protecting the poor and weak, is simply following the Lutheran ideal of expressing love for the neighbor through the state.

Today the welfare state is under attack as Canadian governments are fighting deficits. Lutherans need to be on guard to prevent the poorest members of society being the ones to suffer most from the curbing of the deficits.

The church, as an institution, does not have any great wisdom about economic problems. It does not have any simple answers for our present plight. But the church should speak clearly about the goals that we seek. It is the task of the church to call upon its members to wrestle with these problems and to work towards those goals. Christians will have different solutions to the problems and we must respect each other's opinions. But in the church we should be motivated to work for greater justice with the hope that comes from knowing that God is concerned with these problems and is working with us.

I have not outlined in full the nature of ministry to which the church is called today. But I do believe that in these changing times, these are some of the basic elements for mission. The time is past, if it ever existed, when the mission of the church could be fulfilled by simply building buildings, hiring pastors and holding worship services, Sunday School and other meetings. Today, in a changing, confused and fearful world, the place for the church's mission is in the world with those who are hurting.

Notes

- ¹ Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, No. 234, Theodore G. Tappert (ed. and trans.), *Luther's Works* 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967) 31.
- ² Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, No. 1322, *Luther's Works* 54:138.