

The Church and Its Ministry

Everyone agrees. Lutherans have struggled with the doctrine of church and ministry, especially in the past 200 years and especially in America. Conrad Bergendoff (Augustana Synod/LCA) wrote, “In no area of doctrine has the Lutheran church in America had greater difficulty than in the matter of the ministry.”¹ August Suelflow (LCMS) wrote, “The doctrine of church and ministry . . . is perhaps the most widely discussed and controversial subject in the church today.”² John Brug (WELS) wrote, “For the last two centuries, issues of church and ministry have been one of the most vexing doctrinal problems for Lutheranism, touching all churches from the most liberal to the most conservative.”³

Why? Certainly Pietism initiated debate on church and ministry already in the 1700’s. In the 1800’s in Europe, the debate was “exacerbated by the Prussian Union of 1817 and the separation of church and state during the Weimar Republic.”⁴ In the United States, of course, church and ministry was a hot topic because the Lutheran church had to organize itself apart from governmental oversight and the oversight of existing European churches.

From my perspective, however, one could say that the Lutheran church has struggled because numerous theologians have said more than what is clearly taught in the New Testament.⁵

In 2008 an English translation was published of Wilhelm Loehe’s *Aphorisms on the New Testament Offices and their Relationship to the Congregation / On the Question of the Church’s Polity* from 1849. Loehe confidently asserts that:

- The office of “evangelist” died out with the apostles.⁶
- “Deacons” in New Testament times labored exclusively in mercy work. They did not preach or teach.⁷
- Ordination bestows a gift or a competence from God.⁸
- The congregation should not elect its pastor. The presbyterate propagates itself. Pastors must be selected by other pastors.⁹

To my mind, he is saying things beyond what can be proven from the New Testament.

In 2008 there also was published a doctrinal statement of the Association of Confessional Lutheran Churches (ACLCL). This group, led by Rev. Rolf Preus, consists of six pastors and eight congregations that left the ELS in one way or another in the past two years over the doctrine of the ministry. They confess that Christ has established “a specific office whose incumbents are to preach the gospel and

¹ Conrad Bergendoff, *The Doctrine of the Church in American Lutheranism* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1956), 19.

² August R. Suelflow, *Servant of the Word: The Life and Ministry of C. F. W. Walther* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000), 162-3.

³ John F. Brug, *The Ministry of the Word* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, forthcoming).

⁴ Timothy J. Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops: Public Ministry for the Reformation and Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 37.

⁵ This observation was also made by John Schaller, “The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry,” trans. Wilbert R. Gawrisch, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 78:1 (January 1981), 48. Also in *Our Great Heritage*, Volume 3 (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1991), 491. Also in *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Volume 3 (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997), 91.

⁶ Wilhelm Loehe, *Aphorisms On the New Testament Offices and their Relationship to the Congregation / On the Question of the Church’s Polity*, trans. John R. Stephenson (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2008), 41.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 57, 76.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 55, 93-4.

administer His sacraments,” by which they are referring to the pastoral office. They condemn the teaching that “every use of God’s Word ‘on behalf of believers’ is the divinely instituted public ministry of the word . . . and that every gathering of Christians is to be regarded as church.”¹⁰

In a similar vein, you may know that vicars from Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne are not allowed to administer the Lord’s Supper either publicly or privately. Nor are they allowed to speak the absolution during the public worship service. These tasks are considered to be exclusively the right of ordained pastors. How can one prove these things from the New Testament?

In contrast to the confusion and debate around us, however, I sense that in the WELS there is a remarkable degree of unanimity on the doctrine of church and ministry. How can this be explained? Certainly it is by God’s grace. But humanly speaking, I sense that it is due in large part to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary guiding us to say no more or less than the New Testament.

Exactly 100 years ago, serious work on church and ministry was being done at our seminary.¹¹ The Cincinnati Case was on the front burner from 1904 until 1909. After Adolph Hoenecke’s death from pneumonia on January 3, 1908, Schaller, Koehler, and Pieper studied church and ministry intensively and began publishing. Pieper’s first article appeared in 1911. A flood of articles appeared in the *Quartalschrift/Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* in subsequent years.¹²

By hosting this symposium, the seminary is continuing to show its interest in and concern for this doctrine. We owe a debt of gratitude to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary for its help with church and ministry.

Now on to the topic. I have been asked to speak about *The Church and Its Ministry*. That is, I have been asked to speak on what the *ministry* or *mission* of the church is. What is the church commissioned to do? At first blush, one might think that this is a simple question with a simple answer. But when one looks beneath the surface, as with most topics, one sees divergent points of view and complicated debate.

I. The ministry of the church

Five possible ways of describing the ministry of the church

I have found in print five different answers to the question, “What is the ministry or mission of the church?” In simple terms one can summarize the five positions as follows:

#1 – Only to make this world a better place.

#2 – Both to preach the gospel and to make this world a better place.

#3 – Primarily to preach the gospel, and secondarily to make this world a better place.

#4 – Only to preach the gospel.

¹⁰ “Doctrinal Statement of the Association of Confessional Lutheran Churches (ACLCLC),” <http://reformationchurch.org/ACLCLC.htm>.

¹¹ John Philipp Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, ed. Leigh D. Jordahl (St. Cloud, MN: Sentinel Publishing, 1970), 230-9.

¹² John F. Brug, “The Doctrine of Church and Ministry in the First One Hundred Volumes of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 100:4 (Fall 2003), 251-78.

#5 – To serve God with good works in everything that believers do. (This admittedly is a different approach, not on the same spectrum as the other four).

You can quickly see what the main issue is. How broad is the ministry of the church? Does the church have a responsibility to make the world a better place? If so, how does this responsibility relate to the preaching of the gospel?

You may wonder how close to home this discussion is. As it happens, position #1 is very much alive and well in many church bodies around us. Positions #2-5 can be found in print in Lutheran writings. I have found positions #3-5 in print in WELS writings of the last 50 years. So it is fair to say that there can be differences of opinion even among us in regard to how it is best to articulate the mission of the church. All I can do in this paper is to present how it seems best to me, on the basis of my study of God's Word.

Best is position #4 – Only to preach the gospel

To me it seems clearest and most careful to say that the church has only one ministry or mission or specially assigned work. This work can be summarized in various ways. One can say that the church is to preach the gospel, to share the Word of God and the sacraments, to distribute the means of grace, to convey the forgiveness of sins, or to use the keys. The important point is that making the world a better place, in this view, is not really a part of the mission or ministry of the church. The work specially assigned to the church is spiritual work, aimed at conversion and sanctification.

a. In view of the commission passages

What leads me to favor this understanding, first of all, are the commission passages of the New Testament. There are five main commission passages, one at the end of each of the four gospels and one in the first chapter of Acts. They are very familiar to us:

Matthew 28:19-20 – “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Mark 16:15 – “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”

Luke 24:47-48 – “Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

John 20:22-23 – “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Acts 1:8 – “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The recently completed synodical study of the Great Commission notes that there is a variety of expression in these commission passages.¹³ Yet the overall content is consistent. The work of the church is to communicate a message which focuses on the forgiveness of sins. These five commission passages

¹³ “Matthew 28:19 and the Mission of the WELS,” prepared by a specially appointed committee, chaired by Joel Fredrich, April 23, 2007, <http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?2601&collectionID=1081&categoryID=9921>, 59.

can be combined and paraphrased to say: “God our Savior sends his people to all the world with his message of law and gospel, and through their work he creates faith and directs believers toward fruits of faith.”¹⁴ There is nothing here about fixing the problems of this world.

b. In view of how the apostles describe their work

Next, one can note how the apostles themselves refer to the work to which they were called as public ministers in the church. Once again, it is always preaching about Jesus. It is spiritual work, not making the world a better place. Note these passages:

Acts 10:42-43 – [Peter in Cornelius’ house] “He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Acts 20:24 – [Paul to the Ephesian elders] “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.”

Acts 26:15-18 – [Jesus to Paul at his call, as described by Paul to Agrippa] “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. . . . I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. . . . I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

Looking at these passages and others, it is hard to summarize the mission of the church perfectly and completely in just a few words. We know that when one preaches God’s Word, one must preach both law and gospel. We know that God wants the sacraments of Baptism and Lord’s Supper to be administered. We know that the mission of the church aims not only at conversion, but also at the sanctification of believers.¹⁵ The goal is not just outreach to bring unbelievers into the church; it is also indoctrination of believers in all the truths of God’s Word (Ac 20:27).

Still, the apostle Paul, when he wants to summarize his work in as few words as possible, often talks about “preaching the gospel.” Paul uses this as a handy summary for the work of the church. Note these passages (emphasis mine):

Romans 1:15 – “That is why I am so eager to *preach the gospel* also to you who are at Rome.”

Romans 15:20 – “It has always been my ambition to *preach the gospel* where Christ was not known.”

1 Corinthians 1:17 – “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to *preach the gospel.*”

Galatians 2:7 – “They saw that I had been entrusted with the task of *preaching the gospel* to the Gentiles.”

¹⁴ Ibid., 60.

¹⁵ Ibid., 60.

1 Thessalonians 2:9 – “We worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we *preached the gospel* of God to you.”

Carl Lawrenz explains why this shorthand expression is appropriate: “The entire Word of God . . . stands in close relation to the central message of pardon and salvation in Christ. In proclaiming any part of God’s Word to men the Church is ever to keep it in close relation to this message and to divorce no part from this message.”¹⁶

When our seminary impresses this phrase on its students, it is a biblical summary of what God wants the church to do. It comes from Christ’s words in Mark 16:15 and from the apostle Paul’s words in numerous passages. In brief, our mission is: *khruakate to; eujaggel ion*.

c. In view of what the apostles did

Of course, preaching the gospel is also what we see the apostles doing in their public ministries. Read the book of Acts. Are the apostles interested in preaching God’s Word, or in fixing the world’s social problems, or both? It is always preaching and teaching about Jesus.

Acts 15:35 – “Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.”

Acts 18:11 – “So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.”

Acts 28:31 – “Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.”

It is interesting to think about all the possible social work that could have been undertaken by the early church. The Roman Empire in the first century A.D. was not without its vices and social problems. Christ could have commissioned the apostles, at least in part, to:

- Eliminate poverty and hunger,
- Eliminate slavery,
- Eliminate cruel treatment of animals,
- Eliminate infanticide,
- Eliminate homosexuality and pederasty,
- Work for equal rights for women,
- Work for a more fair taxation system, or
- Try to get out from under Roman rule.

Yet one doesn’t hear a word about any of this in the commission passages or in the passages that describe the work of the early church. Christ didn’t say, “Go into all the world and relieve the world of hunger, suffering, and oppression.” He consistently mentioned spiritual concerns. Repentance, forgiveness of sins, faith, loving one’s brother, heaven.

It is true that on this topic the New Testament does not give *particulas exclusivas* (that is, “exclusive particles”),¹⁷ as with the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, *and not by works*. The New

¹⁶ Carl J. Lawrenz, “What is the Function of the Church in Promoting Civic Righteousness?” *Quartalschrift (Theological Quarterly)* 50:2 (April 1953), 93.

¹⁷ For the concept, see FC Ep III:10; FC SD III:36, 43, 53.

Testament nowhere explicitly says that the work of the church is to preach the gospel, *and not to make the world a better place*. So we cannot exclude social ministry from the work of the church as dogmatically as we can exclude good works from justification.

Still the silence in all these passages is startling. The commission passages and the passages that describe the work of the first public ministers of the church do not talk at all about making the world a better place. The New Testament emphasizes preaching the gospel in such a way that this task presents itself as the one specially assigned mission of the church.

d. In view of the purpose of Christ's coming

As a final proof that preaching the gospel is the one task of the church, we can look at the mission of Jesus himself. Why did Jesus come to earth? What was Jesus' mission? Was it to save sinners, or to make this world a better place, or both?

The passages that describe the purpose of Christ's coming focus on saving the world from sin. He came to give his life as a vicarious atonement for the sins of the world. He did not come to clean up the social problems of this world. Consider the following:

Matthew 1:21 – “You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

Mark 10:45 – “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

1 Timothy 1:15 – “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.”

Hebrews 9:26 – “Now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.”

1 John 4:10 – “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

Some will point out that Jesus also healed people, cast out demons, and fed the hungry while on earth. They therefore conclude that tasks like these should still be an essential part of the ministry of the church today.

It is true that Jesus did these things. But it is never said that welfare work was Jesus' assigned mission. Without a doubt his acts of kindness showed his love for people in need. But most importantly his miracles of help confirmed that he was the Son of God and the promised Messiah (Lk 7:22; Jn 14:11). Significantly, when people looked to Jesus as a “bread-king” who could offer food for this life, Jesus knew that this was a distortion of his ministry. He withdrew and said, “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you” (Jn 6:27).

It was likewise with the apostles. They healed people and even raised the dead. Certainly these miracles showed their love for the needy. But these miracles also authenticated their message and demonstrated that they were Spirit-filled spokesmen for God (Mk 16:20; Ac 14:3; 2 Co 12:12).

The express purpose of Christ's coming was to remove the guilt and punishment of sin in order that sinful humans may be reconciled to God. Since this was the mission of Christ in coming to earth, it is fitting

that the mission of the church be similar. The mission of the church is to announce the forgiveness that Jesus has accomplished for all.

This manner of expression is standard in our Lutheran heritage

Though the New Testament does not have one fixed formula to describe the work of the church, there is a standard formula in the Lutheran Confessions. The Confessions typically describe the ministry of the church as teaching or preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. Look at these examples:

- “So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted” (CA V:1).
- “The power of the church possesses its own command to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments” (CA XXVIII:12).
- “They [the public ministers of the church] are called to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments to the people” (Ap XIII:9)
- “Christ gave to his apostles only spiritual authority, that is, the command to preach the gospel, to proclaim the forgiveness of sins, to administer the sacraments, and to excommunicate the ungodly without the use of physical force” (Tr 31, see also 60).

Edmund Schlink in summarizing the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions said, “The ministry of the spiritual realm is completely circumscribed by the commission to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. All additional statements of the Confessions do not add anything new to this delimitation but merely unfold it.”¹⁸

A similar focus may be found in Luther’s writings. In 1533 in “The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests,” Martin Luther wrote, “There remains nothing for the office of the ministry or the office of preaching other than this single work, namely, to bestow or to present the gospel which Christ commanded to be preached.”¹⁹

It is true that not all WELS writers have spoken identically on this topic. A few have spoken about the church having a primary task and a secondary task.²⁰ However, the following WELS writers talk about the church having one task:

- August Pieper “Are There Legal Regulations in the New Testament?” trans. Carl J. Lawrenz, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 86:1 (Winter 1989), 38. Also in *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Volume 2 (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997), 121.
- Zich, August F. “The Social Gospel,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 31:1 (January 1934), 31.
- Oscar J. Naumann “Church Organization as the Expression of the Function of the Church,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 58:1 (January 1961), 2. Also in *Our Great Heritage*, Volume 3 (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1991), 381.

¹⁸ Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 229.

¹⁹ LW 38, 198. See also LW 26:441.

²⁰ One example is Winfred A. Koelpin, “Let Church Work Be Church Work,” in *The Way to Lutheran Unity* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1972), 94-123. I think we all could live with the way Koelpin articulates things in this overall excellent essay delivered at the Seventh Lutheran Free Conference in July 1970 at Rockford, IL. But I fail to see how his presentation on this particular point is better than the more traditional WELS presentation.

- Armin W. Schuetze “Scriptural Principles with respect to the Church’s Mission and Christian Welfare Work,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 70:3 (July 1973), 197, 205.
- Heinrich J. Vogel “The Doctrine of the Church and Ministry,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 73:1 (January 1976), 14.
- Edward C. Fredrich “How Much Room is there on the Church’s Agenda for Social Issues?” November 13, 1979, WLS Online Essay File, 2.
- Carl J. Lawrenz “The Scriptural Truths of the Church and Its Ministry,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 82:3 (Summer 1985), 180-181.
- Richard E. Lauersdorf “The Doctrine of the Call, with Special Reference to the Question of Its Permanence under Changed Circumstances,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 86:4 (Fall 1989), 265-266.
- Wilbert R. Gawrisch “The Doctrine of Church and Ministry in the Life of the Church Today,” *Proceedings of the Fifty-first Biennial Convention*, 1991, 231.
- John F. Brug “The Priesthood of All Believers and the Ministry,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 91:2 (Spring 1994), 122.
- David J. Valleskey *We Believe—Therefore We Speak: The Theology and Practice of Evangelism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1995), 145.
- Lyle W. Lange *God So Loved the World* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2005), 546.

In addition, the current Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Dogmatics Notes say, “Christ assigned one task to His church: the preaching of the Gospel (including the administration of the sacraments).” *This We Believe* says, “To the church the Lord has assigned the responsibility of calling sinners to repentance, of proclaiming forgiveness through the cross of Christ, and of encouraging believers in their Christian living.”²¹ Similar sentences can be found in our “Theses on the Church and Ministry”²² and in the WELS mission statement.²³

I conclude that to speak of the church as having one mission, the sharing of the means of grace, not only fits best with the New Testament. It has also been the predominant way of speaking in the theological tradition of the Lutheran church and of our own Wisconsin Synod.

But does this mean that we are not interested in helping people in need? Let’s go on to talk about social ministry.

II. Social ministry

God wants believers to help the needy

All of us know that there are many passages in the Bible that tell believers to help the needy unselfishly. Consider these general passages:

²¹ *This We Believe: A Statement of Belief of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1999), 33.

²² “Christ instituted one office in His Church, the ministry of the Gospel. It is the task of proclaiming the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.” *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997), 48.

²³ “The continuing mission of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, as a gathering of men, women, and children united in faith and worship by the word of God, is to make disciples throughout the world for time and for eternity, using the gospel to win the lost for Christ and to nurture believers for lives of Christian service, all to the glory of God.” *Constitution and Bylaws of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, 1997, Foreward.

Matthew 5:7 – “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

Galatians 2:10 – [Paul speaking about Peter, James, and John] “All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.”

Hebrews 13:16 – “Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”

James 1:27 – “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

This love and care is to be extended to all people, even to one’s enemies.

Luke 6:35 – “Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Luke 10:25-37 – The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Romans 12:20 – “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”

In a special way, believers in Christ are expected to show love to fellow believers.

Matthew 10:42 – “If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.”

Romans 12:13 – “Share with God’s people who are in need.”

James 2:15-17 – “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

1 John 3:17 – “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”

Galatians 6:10 – “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”

Helping the needy is so inevitable as a fruit of faith that Jesus says it will be used as a standard of judgment on the Last Day to indicate that faith is present.

Matthew 25:34-36, 40 – “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. . . . Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

Without a doubt, as believers travel through life on this broken-down earth, they will invariably lend a hand to patch things up along the way, the best they can.

This is part of a Christian's life of sanctification

The way we think of it, however, is that this is part of a believer's life of sanctification. This is part of what believers do in response to God's love for them, in harmony with God's will. It is a fruit of faith. It is not part of the specially assigned mission of the church as such.

Each month there is an automatic withdrawal out of my checking account for the WELS Committee on Relief. Each month I take a bag of groceries to the food shelf barrel at my church. The amount, I might confess, is embarrassingly small compared with the abundance of God's blessings. But why do I do this? Is it part of my office as a full-time called minister of the gospel? No. It is part of my life of sanctification as an individual Christian touched by the love of God. Helping the needy is a permanent concern of all Christians, but it is not a permanent part of the divinely instituted public ministry.²⁴

I wonder to myself: If we were to say that helping the needy is part of the mission of the church, wouldn't there be other tasks that could just as legitimately be included? Then maybe we should say that worship and singing hymns of praise is part of the mission of the church. It is something God expects of believers. Then maybe we should say that prayer is part of the mission of the church. It also is expected. And so forth. Where would we draw the line?

Ultimately with this line of approach one could say that all of one's life of sanctification is the work of the church, and there have been writers who have suggested this.²⁵ Then loving one's wife, paying taxes, and being honest at the work place is also the work of the church, because Christians are expected to do these things.

But I wonder if there is benefit or usefulness in expressing things this way. Many activities in the Christian life of sanctification are demanded by God's law also for unbelievers. Unbelievers are to love their wives, pay taxes, and be honest at work. In addition, the family and government are instituted by God to help take care of people in need (1 Ti 2:2; 5:8). So in what sense are these things truly the mission of the church?

I go back to what has already been said. There seems to be work specially given to the church when the church and its ministers are sent into the world, apart from the general command to love others and live a God-pleasing life. What is uniquely commanded to the church when Christ spoke his commissioning words, this is what we do best to grab onto as the mission of the church. In the commission passages, Christ told his disciples to preach the gospel. Preaching the gospel, then, is what we see the apostles doing. This is unique work, not done by unbelievers. This is unique work, not done by any other institution on earth.

Let's look upon preaching the gospel as the special mission of the church. Let's look upon helping the needy as an inevitable fruit of faith, as part of our life of sanctification.

²⁴ Joel D. Fredrich, "The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry," October 18, 1994 (revised January 25, 1997), WLS Online Essay File, 31.

²⁵ Two writers, highly respected by me, who have suggested this way of speaking are Wayne Mueller, "One Lord, One Church, One Ministry," Western Wisconsin District Convention, June 7, 1988, included in the *WELS Ministry Compendium*, Vol. 2, (WELS Parish Services, 1992), 553-580; and James R. Huebner, "The Relationship Between the Doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers and Public Ministry," Metro-North Pastoral Conference, January 18, 1993, WLS Online Essay File. I don't see anything scripturally wrong in these presentations, but I wonder if it is the best way of articulating things.

Changed people change society

With this understanding, the church still has a tremendous positive influence on society, but an influence that one could say is indirect. The church teaches its members to visit the sick and share with the needy. The church teaches its members to be good citizens who pay taxes and work for the common good. The church teaches its members to look upon their work as a vocation from God where they can serve other people. In this way, the world becomes a better place as changed people change society. The church benefits society as it converts more people to faith in Christ, so that more people will function as salt in the world with their Christian love and Christian lifestyle.

Kurt Marquart quotes H. P. Hamann in this regard: “The most significant contribution of the church to the welfare of society and the world is by way of its members, as each in his own niche in life and in accordance with his own special capabilities works for and serves his fellow-men.”²⁶ Edward Fredrich wrote, “The church proclaims the gospel. The Spirit’s power works faith. The justified believer undertakes his missions of sanctification. In love to God and neighbor he enlists his efforts on behalf of what is best in any social action program. It is as simple as that—and as profound as that. It is God’s way of making life on this blighted realm of ours just a little bit more endurable. It is the trusting approach that one-at-a-time conversions bear fruit, that sanctified individuals can make a difference.”²⁷

The church may administer programs for helping the needy

Now for the next logical question. If helping the needy is not the specially assigned mission of the church but rather the duty of individual Christians in their lives of sanctification, is it ever proper for the church to organize a program of relief for the needy? Can there be corporate acts of mercy in the church?

The answer is an unequivocal “yes,” because we see this very thing on a number of occasions in the New Testament. Note these examples:

Acts 4:34-35 – When people sold property, they “brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.”

Acts 6:1-6 – In the congregation at Jerusalem, there was a “daily distribution of food” (v.1). When controversy about fairness arose, the congregation decided to select seven men who were officially installed into a church office in order to carry out this responsibility (v. 6).

Acts 11:28-30 – When the prophet Agabus predicted a famine, the church in Antioch gathered a gift of money for the “brothers living in Judea” and sent the gift “by Barnabas and Saul.”

2 Corinthians 8-9; Romans 15:26; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4
Paul gathered an offering in Macedonia and Achaia “for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Ro 15:26). This was an official church-sponsored offering. Paul encouraged an orderly group procedure for gathering gifts (1 Co 16:2). Representatives of the churches were selected in order to convey the offering to Jerusalem (1 Co 16:3, 2 Co 8:19).

²⁶ Kurt E. Marquart, *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance* (Fort Wayne, IN: International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990), 192.

²⁷ Edward C. Fredrich, “How Much Room is there on the Church’s Agenda for Social Issues?” November 13, 1979, WLS Online Essay File, 5.

1 Timothy 5:9, 16 – The church in Ephesus obviously had a “list of widows” who would be supported by the church.

Whether or not the church will have a formal, corporate program of social welfare is an adiaphoron. If it does, we think of it this way: The church on these occasions is simply pooling together the fruits of faith of its members. The church is organizing to help its members put their sanctification into practice. It is still not the mission of the church to relieve poverty.

Throughout church history one finds the church organizing relief work, including the Lutheran church. The Wittenberg Church Order of 1522 under the guidance of Luther established a “common chest” for welfare work.²⁸ Luther on several occasions recommended that begging should end in Christian communities. He urged both secular and church authorities to look into orderly ways of providing for the basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing.²⁹

In 1863 C. F. W. Walther published *The Right Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation Independent of the State*, a practical compendium on how a congregation should be constituted and how it should function. He expected a Lutheran congregation to be concerned about the needy in its midst. He wrote, “The congregation shall also provide food, clothing, habitation, and all other necessities for the poor, widows, orphans, aged, and invalids, which these themselves cannot procure and [for which] they have no relatives who first of all owe them these things.”³⁰ Later he wrote, “For the adequate care of the poor, widows, orphans, aged, invalids, sick, and the like, the congregation shall elect one or more persons who are to serve as almoners and see to it that no one is overlooked in the matter of necessary support and help.”³¹ This is not the “social gospel,” and should never be castigated as such.

It is worth noting that the programs of relief mentioned in Scripture are all directed at needy brothers in the faith. This also was the emphasis in Luther and Walther. Certainly Christians are to “do good to all” (Gal 6:2), but there is always a special bond of love and care for those with whom we are united in Christ.

Corporate acts of mercy in the WELS

One does not have to look far for such corporate acts of mercy also in the WELS. Historically many congregations have had an alms fund or support fund to help members in need. In 1922 the East Fork orphanage was opened to care for unwanted Apache children.³² In 1946 the Committee on Relief was established to provide relief for war sufferers in Germany and Poland. In 1957 its scope was widened to include general relief at home and around the world.³³ Since 1961 people of the WELS, mostly women, have operated the Central African Medical Mission.³⁴ Add in the Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service, the Belle Plaine Lutheran Home, the Humanitarian Aid Fund of the Board for World Missions,

²⁸ Carter Lindberg, “No Greater Service to God than Christian Love,” in *Social Ministry in the Lutheran Tradition*, ed. Foster R. McCurley (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 57.

²⁹ LW 44:189-90; LW 45:169-94.

³⁰ C. F. W. Walther, *The Form of a Christian Congregation*, trans. John Theodore Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 147.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

³² Theodore A. Sauer, Harold R. John, and Ernst H. Wendland, *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People: A Century of WELS World Missions* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992), 46, 311.

³³ From information shared by Committee on Relief Chairman Philip Schupmann.

³⁴ For an interesting historical account of the CAMM, see Ernst H. Wendland, Theodore A. Sauer, and Mark Braun, “Let Us Do Good: Forty Years of WELS Medical Missions in Central Africa,” *LOGIA* XVII:1 (Epiphany 2008), 37-50.

and other programs, and one sees that Christians in our own midst have been eager to band together to help the needy.

By common admission, there are two dangers with social programs like these in the church. First, they could result in people coming to the church for the wrong reason. If you give out food after the church service, people may come to church to receive earthly bread rather than the Bread of Life. Missiologists sometimes talk about “rice Christians.” Such people are “Christians” as long as there is free rice.

But on the other hand, a judicious distribution of humanitarian aid can also open doors for the gospel. If you dig a well in an African village, then all of sudden the chief may invite you in and give your message a hearing. Things like this have happened in a number of our world mission fields. Christian love can adorn the gospel that the church professes and be a legitimate draw for outsiders to the church.

We think of New Testament passages. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:14,16). “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:35). Paul told slaves to live a God-pleasing life so that they will “make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (Tit 2:10).

A second danger with social programs is that the church in this way may lose its focus on preaching the gospel. There is so much human need on every hand that the church could easily and innocently be drawn into spending the best of its energy in trying to supply these physical needs. Then gospel preaching could suffer.

In this regard, I’m happy to see that most of our corporate acts of charity in the WELS are consciously connected somehow to gospel proclamation. As we establish an orphanage, nursing home, or day care center, we do so in part so that we have opportunity to share God’s Word with people there. The nurses in our Central African Medical Mission regularly have opportunity to talk about Christ or to share Christian literature.³⁵ Christian Life Resources in its mission statement says, “The mission of Christian Life Resources is to use life and family issues as bridges to convey the love of God and to share the message of salvation through Christ.”³⁶ The Committee on Relief as often as possible likes to distribute aid through WELS congregations and missions. The Humanitarian Aid Fund of the Board for World Missions has a published policy indicating that it wants to expend money where it can serve as a bridge or a point of contact for gospel proclamation.

Perhaps it would be useful to quote from the three guiding principles of the Humanitarian Aid Fund for the Board for World Missions. They are:

- 1) The Church is to carry out Christ’s commission by using the Means of Grace. . . .
- 2) Acts of Christian love . . . may assist Christians in carrying out Christ’s commission by providing a point of contact with non-Christians. . . .
- 3) Since God causes his church to grow only through the Means of Grace, use of humanitarian efforts must, therefore, always be subservient to the use of the Means of Grace.³⁷

Not surprisingly, these principles are very similar to theses written by Armin Schuetze in 1972:

- A. The church’s specific mission is to preach the gospel of forgiveness in Christ.

³⁵ Sauer, John, and Wendland, *To Every Nation*, 198.

³⁶ “Christian Life Resources: Our Mission,” <http://www.christianliferesources.com/?/aboutus/index.php>.

³⁷ “CME Recommendations to the Board for World Missions on Humanitarian Work in our World Mission Fields,” January 26, 1998, shared by David J. Valleskey, current chairman of the Humanitarian Aid Committee.

- B. Preaching Christ includes preaching the fruits of faith in Christ, Christian sanctification, a significant part of which is Christian welfare work.
- C. The Christian will live a Christian life, will practice sanctification at all times, in all life's situations, through whatever institutions are a part of his life on earth.
- D. In Christian liberty the church may set up the machinery to administer welfare work and thus assist its members in carrying out this responsibility.
- E. When the church administers welfare work, it will, wherever possible, bring this into a close relationship with its prime responsibility of preaching the gospel.³⁸

This is our common understanding. The assigned mission of the church is to preach the gospel, not to make the world a better place. But Christians in their lives of sanctification have love for the weak and needy, and the church can organize programs to help them show this love to people near and far.

Distinguishing means of grace ministry from charity work in the WELS

In addition to what has been said, it strikes me that we have some good practices in the WELS that reinforce the notion that the mission of the church is preaching the gospel, and not charity work.

First, as a general practice we call people into positions of public ministry only when they have direct use of the means of grace. We hire people when they do not. Occasionally the question is raised whether a new position, such as a development director or a church administrator, should be a "called" position. As I understand it, if the person is expected to share the Word of God as part of his official duties, then it is set up as a called position of public ministry. If not, then it is a hired position.³⁹ Some years ago I was involved in a meeting where ELS leaders asked the WELS if we have any positions of public ministry that do not involve direct ministry with the means of grace. The answer given by our synod president was "no."

Given Acts 6:1-6, I don't know that we could insist on this practice biblically. It seems that the seven deacons in Acts 6 were installed into a public office of the church (v.6), but their work was waiting on tables (v. 2). Still, our practice of extending divine calls only to those who distribute the means of grace fits very well with our understanding that distributing the means of grace is the one divinely given mission of the church. If the work of the church is preaching the gospel, then let's make preaching the gospel the work that we commission our public ministers to do.

Secondly, our synodical budget is intended to be 100% for means-of-grace ministry or support of means-of-grace ministry. Our corporate acts of mercy are all non-budgetary funds.

Once again, we could not insist on this practice biblically. Remember that the offering in 2 Corinthians 8-9, still used today in teaching Biblical stewardship of money, was for eleemosynary purposes. That is, it was charity for needy people, rather than gifts for the support of word-and-sacrament ministry.

Still, by making this distinction between means-of-grace ministry, which is funded through the budget, and corporate charity, which is not, we can help keep before our eyes what the true work of the church is.

³⁸ Armin W. Schuetze, "Scriptural Principles with respect to the Church's Mission and Christian Welfare Work," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 70:3 (July 1973), 205-7.

³⁹ Thomas P. Nass, "The Revised *This We Believe* of the WELS on the Ministry," *LOGIA* X:3 (Trinity 2001), 35.

David Valleskey comments on this: “The WELS historically has kept activities not directly related to preaching the gospel, e.g., the Relief Committee, the African Medical Mission, outside of the mission budget. . . . It might be best to continue the practice of funding humanitarian work with non-budgetary funds. This helps to maintain the scriptural distinction between the church’s mission of proclaiming the gospel of salvation and an auxiliary role of demonstrating concern for people’s physical needs.”⁴⁰

We should never begrudge gifts given for humanitarian aid purposes. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to be generous in their gifts of charity for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Co 8:7; 9:6-11). He did not tell them that the money could be better spent by sending missionaries to Spain. I hope no one takes from this paper a perception that gifts of love to the needy are not important.

Still, inasmuch as preaching the gospel is the unique mission of the church, and in our synod the regular synodical budget is set up exclusively for our joint work in preaching the gospel, wouldn’t it be odd if the synodical budget went lacking while all sorts of other projects were funded? We have good reason to get behind the program funded by our synodical budget, because this is our jointly agreed-upon, means-of-grace ministry.

Charity work with other Christians

Here is a stickier question that comes up regularly. Is it allowable for Christians to participate in joint social projects with other Christians not of their fellowship? For example, could we join in a hunger drive with neighboring Baptist churches?

When it comes to projects that do not involve worship and the means of grace and do not give the impression that we are united in faith, it could be possible to participate together. For example, in 1889 WELS people rallied with Roman Catholics and others to repeal the Bennett Law, which required English instruction in all Wisconsin schools.⁴¹ There have been WELS people who have joined in pro-life rallies.

Still, with many endeavors undertaken by church groups, the lines are not always clearly drawn between means-of-grace ministry and charity work. Means-of-grace ministry is often involved to some degree. What about an orphanage or nursing home? When run by church groups, these very likely are intended to be places where the Word of God will be shared. We do well not to participate with others in such endeavors, if we are not united in faith.

Furthermore, even when a project is exclusively a charitable project without the sharing of God’s Word, the impression may easily be given that participants are working together as fellow Christians when they carry on the project together. Read 2 Corinthians 8-9. When Paul encouraged the charitable offering for the saints in Jerusalem, he recognized that it was a way of expressing thanks to God together (2 Co 9:11-13). This offering was a way for the church in Corinth to express its unity in faith with the churches in Macedonia and with the church in Jerusalem.

Consequently John Brug writes, “We, therefore, do not join with heterodox churches in charitable work nor in the operation of charitable institutions. When the Synodical Conference was dissolved, arrangements were made for an orderly dissolution of shared charitable work.”⁴²

⁴⁰ David J. Valleskey, “A Biblical, Lutheran Theology of Missions,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 94:3 (Summer 1997), 181.

⁴¹ Edward C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992), 86.

⁴² John F. Brug, *Church Fellowship* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1996), 114.

In regard to our WELS Committee on Relief, Chairman Philip Schupmann wrote in a personal e-mail:

The WELS Committee on Relief has used international relief agencies as conduits to supply funds for relief efforts in parts of the world where we do not have a mission presence. In the past we used LWR (Lutheran World Relief) as such a conduit, but that was more than 10 years ago. We don't use them anymore because it just caused too many concerns and questions. . . . Our preference when we receive gifts for areas of the world where we don't have a mission presence is to use CARE, an international relief agency without religious ties. We have given over \$1,000,000 in cumulative gifts to CARE over the years. They are very proud of their association with the WELS.⁴³

This topic, actually, was a source of tension between the WELS and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod during the 1930's, 40's, and 50's. During these years, the LCMS began participating in social projects with Lutherans not in the Synodical Conference. In 1941 LCMS President John Behnken wrote a policy statement declaring that cooperation would be confined to "externals," not "the dissemination of the gospel."⁴⁴ This activity, then, was called "cooperation in externals."

The problem was that these "externals" often involved means-of-grace ministry. George Lillegard wrote, "It is clear that the program of 'cooperation in externals' has in many instances gone far beyond anything that can legitimately be called 'externals.'"⁴⁵ Most notably, the LCMS joined with other Lutherans in the military chaplaincy program, while the WELS did not.

In 1953-54, the WELS Conference of Presidents published a pamphlet entitled "Cooperation in Externals." This pamphlet admits the possibility of cooperation in externals, and gives as an example the fact that the WELS "employed a non-Synodical Conference Lutheran welfare organization in Pennsylvania to distribute clothing to war sufferers in Europe."⁴⁶ But it points out that Missouri's cooperation was clearly going further.

Significantly, writers from inside social ministry organizations are often proud to point out how their organizations bring Christians together and serve the ecumenical movement. Joint welfare work has in numerous cases paved the way to full-blown church union. One-time LCMS Pastor F. Dean Lueking admits, "The welfare people were always on the leading edge of closer working ties with fellow Christians outside the Synodical organization."⁴⁷ This makes sense. There is no doctrine involved. Everyone can easily agree, even unbelievers, that it is good to help the needy. But this ecumenical tendency makes us leery.

Recently this topic has surfaced among us in regard to Habitat for Humanity. Habitat for Humanity founder Millard Fuller reveals his intentions when he entitles his book: *More Than Houses*. Habitat for Humanity is "openly and unashamedly a Christian ministry" that thinks of itself as "building the kingdom of God on earth."⁴⁸ Through the "theology of the hammer" it hopes to "reunite the divided

⁴³ Philip Schupmann, e-mail message to author, August 8, 2008.

⁴⁴ Carl T. Uehling, "A Sign of God's Grace, A Fruit of Faith: American Lutheran Social Service from 1800 to 1945," in *Social Ministry in the Lutheran Tradition*, ed. Foster R. McCurley (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 101.

⁴⁵ George O. Lillegard, "Modern Ecumenism and Cooperation in Externals," *Quartalschrift (Theological Quarterly)* 56:4 (October 1959), 248. Also in *Essays on Church Fellowship* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1996), 192.

⁴⁶ "Cooperation in Externals," published by the WELS Conference of Presidents, 1953-54. In *Essays on Church Fellowship* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1996), 381.

⁴⁷ F. Dean Lueking, *A Century of Caring: The Welfare Ministry Among Missouri Synod Lutherans, 1868-1968* (St. Louis: LCMS Board of Social Ministry, 1968). 82-3.

⁴⁸ Forrest L. Bivens, Review of *More Than Houses*, by Millard Fuller, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 98:2 (Spring 2001), 148.

Christian family.”⁴⁹ Consequently our WELS Conference of Presidents in 2005 resolved to encourage WELS congregations and members not to participate in Habitat for Humanity.

In short, cooperation with other Christians is possible if the charitable activity is properly limited so that there is no means-of-grace ministry and no impression of religious fellowship. There are good reasons to be very cautious, however.

III. What others say about the ministry of the church

The social gospel

I assume that what has been presented in this paper is out of sync with many if not most thinkers in the Christian church today. It is taken for granted in many if not most church bodies that social ministry is at least part of the mission of the church. The Lausanne Covenant produced by evangelicals from 150 countries in 1974 asserted, “We affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.”⁵⁰ Derrel Watkins in *Christian Social Ministry* says in a typical fashion, “Social ministry is a primary function of the church. . . . God intends helping ministries to have a prominent place in the church’s program along with evangelism.”⁵¹

This was not the case until the rise of the “social gospel.” Prior to the 20th century, I assume that there was a general consensus among most all Christian groups that the mission of the church, to say it in a general way, was bringing souls to know and follow Christ. E. Clifford Nelson in his history of Lutherans in North America shows that even the General Synod, the most liberal of Lutheran organizations, was solid in a spiritual understanding of the work of the church at the turn of the 20th century. A report at the 1913 convention of the General Synod asserted that “the church can best contribute its great share to the solution of the various social problems . . . by holding itself strictly to the faithful preaching of the Gospel, and to the work of bringing individual members of society to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, and to a consecrated life of service in and for His kingdom.”⁵²

If you look at the writings of C. F. W. Walther, Adolph Hoenecke, and Franz Pieper on the church—not to mention Chemnitz, Gerhard, and the Lutheran dogmaticians—you will quickly find that they do not really treat the mission of the church as a separate topic. It was not really an issue for them. If they were to write today, I suspect things would be different. The church at the end of the 20th century is different than the church at the beginning of the 20th century in that it must reckon with and take a position on the social gospel. Should the church be involved in social ministry? If so, to what extent and in what way?

The name often associated with the rise, or at least the popularity, of the social gospel is Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), a German Baptist pastor who served a congregation in a tough neighborhood of New York City from 1886-1897 and then was a professor at Rochester Theological Seminary from 1897-1918. In 1907 he published a book entitled *Christianity and the Social Order* which was followed in 1912 by *Christianizing the Social Order*. Rauschenbusch can be said to be a Christian socialist. He called upon the church to lead the way in reconstructing society. He wrote, “The christianizing of the social order was the very aim with which Christianity set out. That aim has long been submerged and almost forgotten, but it has re-emerged simultaneously with the rise of modern life,

⁴⁹ Paul M. Janke, “Q & A: Habitat for Humanity,” *Forward in Christ* 93:2 (February 2006), 9.

⁵⁰ Edward C. Fredrich, “Activity vs. Activism in the Church,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 71:4 (October 1974), 247.

⁵¹ Derrel R. Watkins, *Christian Social Ministry: An Introduction* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 99-100.

⁵² E. Clifford Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 387.

and now demands a reckoning with every religious intellect, offering us all a richer synthesis of truth and a more distinctively Christian type of religious experience.”⁵³

Since Rauschenbusch, the concept of social ministry has gone in many directions. Some with a more modest view call upon the church simply to provide the basic needs of underprivileged people. Many, however, consider it the church’s role also to change the social structures that supposedly cause social problems. In other words, it is not only social service, but also social reform. Many look upon the church as the “conscience of the state.” Many consider it appropriate for the church to push a political agenda or an economic ideology. For many, the chief concern of the church is no longer the primitive idea of a spiritual, otherworldly redemption from sin, but rather the elimination of poverty and oppression on earth.

Perhaps the most radical strain of the social gospel is “liberation theology,” popular in Latin America. This theology looks to the church to remove inequities in the world. It encourages oppressed people to rise up to be freed from oppression. Ernst Wendland summarizes the thinking of Gustavo Gutierrez, author of *A Theology of Liberation*, this way: “Only by an authentic solidarity with the oppressed and by an active commitment to the cause of their liberation can the church be true to its mission.”⁵⁴

Evaluation of the social gospel

What does one make of this? First, it strikes me how humanly appealing the social gospel is. Social ministry looks pious and godly, worthwhile and beneficial to society. In addition, its results are often tangible, visible, and measurable, unlike the preaching of the gospel. Longtime church members may be swept along in their churches because the shift in emphasis may be subtle, and helping the poor is a good thing.

But think how dangerous it is when the gospel of the forgiveness of sins is shifted off center stage, and perhaps off the stage entirely. The spiritual consequences may be eternally devastating for souls who are not led to repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus. Think of how the devil is rejoicing when this happens. This means he wins the victory.

Focusing on social ministry without repentance, conversion, and faith in Jesus has sometimes been compared to polishing brass or rearranging chairs on the Titanic as it was sinking. What was needed when the Titanic was sinking was to get people into lifeboats. In the same way this world is sinking, and we need first and foremost to get people into the lifeboat of faith in Jesus Christ.

WELS theologians first wrote on the topic of social ministry in the 1930’s. Think of the situation in that decade. America was in the throes of an unspeakable economic depression that refused to go away. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt started to promote the New Deal, actively pushing for the churches of America to help the country get out of the depression by supporting his economic recovery ideas. In response, seminary professor August Zich published articles in 1934⁵⁵ and 1936.⁵⁶ At the 1935 WELS convention, H. C. Nitz had to get up and remind the delegates that our work in the church is the spiritual work of preaching the gospel for eternal salvation. It is not to rescue the country from its economic woes.

⁵³ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: MacMillan: 1919), viii-ix.

⁵⁴ Ernst H. Wendland, “A Theology of Liberation,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 77:2 (April 1980): 124.

⁵⁵ August F. Zich, “The Social Gospel,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 31:1 (January 1934), 18-31.

⁵⁶ August F. Zich, “Lutheranism and the Economic Question,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 33:2 (April 1936), 102-21

He warned about mixing church and state.⁵⁷ The synod convention in 1943 followed with an essay by Dr. Henry Koch entitled, “My Kingdom is not of this World.”⁵⁸

There was quite a bit of passion in WELS writers of previous generations when they wrote about the social gospel. Irwin Habeck wrote, “This is not an academic question which gives us an opportunity to exercise our theological wits.” Behind the social gospel he saw liberalism, which made Jesus into a “model” and a “teacher” while “the blood atonement has long since been abandoned.”⁵⁹ Edward Fredrich called the social gospel the “heresy of heresies” and “a basic, far-reaching evil that threatens the very foundations.”⁶⁰

As I think about this topic, I concur. This really is serious business. Is the church’s work to distribute the forgiveness of sins or to make the world a better place? We are talking about the heart of things. The social gospel turns Jesus into a bread king, as it were—the very thing he resisted. The social gospel has a different understanding of the gospel itself. It is really not gospel at all, but rather law.⁶¹ Churches that focus on the social gospel rather than on Christ crucified are like “blind guides” that could lead their blind followers into the pit of hell (Mt 15:14).

Jesus said, “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” (Mt 16:26). In addition he said, “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn 18:36).

But now, what can be said about our Lutheran neighbors in America on this topic?

Social ministry in the LCMS

The situation in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod on social ministry is very interesting. From Walther’s time through the middle of the 20th century, the doctrine and practice of the LCMS was in accord with the position of this paper. In *The Abiding Word* collection of doctrinal essays, LCMS pastor H. Richard Klann wrote, “The Christian Church has had, and continues to have, only one assigned function in this world: ‘Ye shall be witnesses unto Me.’ . . . The function of the Christian congregation is to administer the means of grace in its midst and to serve in this world for the conversion of the sinner to God.”⁶²

During its first hundred years, while the LCMS was operating with this understanding of the mission of the church, numerous charitable organizations nevertheless sprang up throughout the synod. The first Lutheran hospital opened in the St. Louis area in 1858, and the first Lutheran orphanage in 1868. By 1900, LCMS members were operating 7 hospitals, 8 orphanages, 5 homes for the aged, and 9 societies for placing abandoned children into homes.⁶³ In 1904 the Institution for the Feeble-minded and Epileptic

⁵⁷ H. C. Nitz, “Another Gospel, An Essay on The Social Gospel,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 32:4 (October 1935), 244-74.

⁵⁸ Henry Koch, “My Kingdom is not of this World,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 40:4 (October 1943), 231-53; 41:1 (January 1944), 1-32; 41:2 (April 1944), 110-23.

⁵⁹ Irwin J. Habeck, “An Evaluation of the Term ‘Christ’s Ministry to the Whole Man,’” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 66:1 (January 1969), 53.

⁶⁰ Edward C. Fredrich, “Activity vs. Activism,” 251.

⁶¹ See Zich, “The Social Gospel,” 29. Also Jonathan E. Schultz, “Lutherans and the Social Gospel,” February 2-3, 1987, WLS Online Essay File, 8.

⁶² H. Richard Klann, “The Structure and Function of the Christian Church,” *The Abiding Word*, Volume 3 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1960), 382-3.

⁶³ Lueking, *A Century of Caring*, 21.

Children was established at Watertown, WI. Obviously a more restricted understanding of the church's mission did not stop God's people from showing their fruits of faith in extending mercy to the needy.

Things changed in the 1960's and 1970's, however. The Detroit convention in 1965 adopted some "Mission Affirmations" saying that "the church is God's mission to the whole man. . . . Christians, individually and corporately, prayerfully seek to serve the needs of the total man."⁶⁴ At the New York convention in 1967 the LCMS officially adopted social action as a corporate task of the church. In 1968 the LCMS sponsored an inner city housing program called "Keys for Christ." About this program Martin Scharlemann wrote, "In the light of the theological traditions of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, such a program in social action constitutes a radical change in outlook and method."⁶⁵

In 1968 F. Dean Lueking authored *A Century of Caring: The Welfare Ministry Among Missouri Synod Lutherans, 1868-1968*. He spoke about "the primary—not secondary—place that compassionate service to humans in need occupies in the life of the Christian church."⁶⁶ He asserted, "What is required is a much clearer understanding of the welfare ministry as part and parcel of the mainstream life of the church."⁶⁷

In 1971 Martin Scharlemann published *The Church's Social Responsibilities*. Without a doubt this book had a tone different from pre-1960 Missouri. He wrote, "What we have failed to do at times, particularly as Lutherans, is to see the necessity for the churches themselves to become involved in the problems of society."⁶⁸ He argued that "social ministry is a necessary element of church life."⁶⁹ He was happy that some Lutherans have become aware that "just saving souls amounted to a stunted caricature of what the church's real task was in a world suffering from injustice, exploitation, and political structures indifferent to human need."⁷⁰

Even though fellowship had been broken in 1961, a number of WELS authors responded to these developments in the LCMS. In 1968, Irwin Habeck published a review of the Concordia publication, *The Christian and Social Concerns*.⁷¹ In 1969 he followed with "An Evaluation of the Term 'Christ's Ministry to the Whole Man.'"⁷² In 1969 Carl Lawrenz wrote a detailed report on the LCMS convention.⁷³ Armin Schuetze wrote essays in 1973⁷⁴ and 1975.⁷⁵ Edward Fredrich wrote essays in

⁶⁴ Ibid., 77-8.

⁶⁵ Martin H. Scharlemann, *The Church's Social Responsibilities* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), 95.

⁶⁶ Lueking, *A Century of Caring*, 73.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁸ Scharlemann, *The Church's Social Responsibilities*, 76.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 44.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 94.

⁷¹ Irwin J. Habeck, Review of *The Christian and Social Concerns*, by Rudolph F. Norden, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 65:3 (July 1968), 219-20.

⁷² Irwin J. Habeck, "An Evaluation of the Term 'Christ's Ministry to the Whole Man,'" *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 66:1 (January 1969), 50-8.

⁷³ Carl J. Lawrenz, "The Denver Convention of the LC-MS, July 11-18, 1969," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 66:4 (October 1969), 77-83.

⁷⁴ Armin W. Schuetze, "Scriptural Principles with respect to the Church's Mission and Christian Welfare Work," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 70:3 (July 1973), 194-208.

⁷⁵ Armin W. Schuetze, "The Church's Social Concerns—Scriptural Imperatives and Limitations." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 72:2 (April 1975), 146-64. Also in *Our Great Heritage*, Volume 3 (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1991), 405-23.

1974⁷⁶ and 1979.⁷⁷ All of them were alarmed by Missouri's openness to social action as a part of the mission of the church, almost as though it were on a level equal with the preaching of the gospel.

But what about the LCMS today? The Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) published a report in 1999 entitled "Faith Active in Love: Human Care in the Church's Life."⁷⁸ This report is clearly in category number #3 as outlined at the beginning of this paper. Preaching the gospel is given as the chief work of the church. Helping people in need is a secondary work. There are good encouragements for Christians to be eager and generous in charity work. There are good encouragements for the church not to lose its focus on preaching the gospel as the chief work.

What has struck me in recent years, however, is the writing and activity of Rev. Matthew Harrison, presently the Executive Director of LCMS World Relief and Human Care. I sense that he is an aggressive leader who is respected among conservative Missourians as a graduate of Fort Wayne and an editor of *LOGIA* magazine. According to Harrison, the church has three tasks: 1) proclamation, 2) worship, and 3) mercy.⁷⁹ He writes, "I am convinced that there is an overwhelming explicit and implicit mandate for mercy as a corporate churchly task, inherent in biblical Lutheran theology."⁸⁰ He is very bold in announcing that the corporate church should do more in the way of social ministry.

Of course I admire his heart for serving people in need. But is there really an "overwhelmingly explicit mandate for mercy as a corporate churchly task?" Where is this mandate? As we have seen, it is not in the commission passages, nor in the apostles' description of their work, nor in the Lutheran Confessions.

I agree with Armin Schuetze: "Claiming the church is to provide ministries and services for all the needs of 'the whole man' places upon it responsibilities that go beyond Scripture and sidetrack it from its saving mission and the means entrusted to it by God."⁸¹

Social ministry in the ELCA

In the ELCA constitution, preaching the gospel and improving the world are put side by side as official goals of the ELCA.⁸² This is position #2 as outlined at the beginning. When one looks further inside the ELCA, however, one fears that in its daily life the ELCA is swimming in the river of the social gospel, and its agenda is driven by one social issue after another.⁸³

⁷⁶ Edward C. Fredrich, "Activity vs. Activism in the Church," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 71:4 (October 1974), 246-53.

⁷⁷ Edward C. Fredrich, "How Much Room is there on the Church's Agenda for Social Issues?" November 13, 1979, WLS Online Essay File.

⁷⁸ "Faith Active in Love: Human Care in the Church's Life," A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/faith.pdf>.

⁷⁹ Matthew C. Harrison, "The Church's Role of Mercy in the Community," LCMS World Relief and Human Care, <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/WRHC/RoleofMercy.pdf>, 4-5.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸¹ Armin W. Schuetze, *Church—Mission—Ministry* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1995), 56.

⁸² <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Secretary/Churchwide-Organization-Administration.aspx>.

⁸³ For a discussion of the inroads of the social gospel into the ELCA see Patsy A. Leppien and J. Kincaid Smith, *What's Going On Among the Lutherans?* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992), 170-88.

For example, the 2007 ELCA convention deliberated about the Iraq war, genocide in Darfur, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It adopted a social statement on education. Finally it resolved anew to fight the HIV and AIDS pandemic and discussed how to respond to world hunger and other disasters.⁸⁴

Very prominent on the ELCA website is the Church in Society Unit. Here it is evident that the ELCA is interested in social reform and action as well as social service. Among other things, this branch of the ELCA administration produces statements on a wide variety of social issues.⁸⁵ Producing social statements actually was a feature of both the LCA⁸⁶ and the ALC⁸⁷ already prior to the establishment of the ELCA in 1988. The Church in Society Unit also has offices in Washington and New York for public policy advocacy with the United States government and the United Nations.

One wonders how liberal Lutherans can harmonize these social action activities with Augsburg Confession Article 28 which distinguishes the roles of church and government. “The powers of church and civil government must not be mixed. . . .It [the church] should not usurp the other’s duty, . . . interfere with judgments concerning any civil ordinances or contracts, prescribe to magistrates laws concerning the form of government that should be established” (CA XXVIII:12-13).

Finally, there is Lutheran Services in America (LSA). LSA is an umbrella organization for some 300 Lutheran social service groups. It currently is the largest nonprofit human services delivery system in the country with combined total budgets of over \$9 billion.⁸⁸ The LCMS continues to partner with the ELCA in this comprehensive system for human services.

How deep into the social gospel is the ELCA? God only knows. Already forty years ago, however, there was a frightening statistic in the Kersten survey of Lutherans in the Detroit area. This question was asked: “The most important thing is the salvation of mankind to eternal life rather than carrying on a social reform program in this world.” Fully 75% of LCA pastors *disagreed* with this statement as well as 43% of ALC pastors.⁸⁹

Again I agree with Armin Schuetze: “A church that cuts down on its mission program and directs its energy to solving the problems of poverty, sickness, the aging, a church that considers it more important to provide good housing for the poor on earth than to lead the poor in spirit to the eternal mansions in heaven is losing sight of its mission in the world.”⁹⁰

IV. Encouragement for WELS pastors

I hope your first reaction in hearing this paper is the same as my first reaction in writing it. It is good to be reminded of our mission. Of course I have been telling you things you know. But there is value in being reminded of the basics (2 Pe 1:12-13).

⁸⁴ <http://archive.elca.org/assembly/summary/>.

⁸⁵ <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Church-in-Society.aspx>.

⁸⁶ See Christa R. Klein and Christian D. von Dehsen, *Politics and Policy: The Genesis and Theology of Social Statements in the Lutheran Church in America* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

⁸⁷ See Carl F. Reuss, ed., *Conscience and Action: Social Statements of the American Lutheran Church, 1961-1970* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971).

⁸⁸ Robert Duea, “Bringing Hope and Life: Lutheran Social Ministry Organizations in America since World War II,” in *Social Ministry in the Lutheran Tradition*, ed. Foster R. McCurley (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 106, 124.

⁸⁹ Lawrence K. Kersten, *The Lutheran Ethic* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 132.

⁹⁰ Schuetze, “Scriptural Principles,” 205.

Also, I find it uplifting to know that on the topic of the mission of the church, though we may seem alone in our modern-day world, we are standing with the historic church. The situation is the same as with inerrancy, homosexuality, the ordination of women, and close communion. Looking at things historically, we are not the ones who are odd or different. It is everyone else who has shifted.

Mostly, though, I hope this reminder of our mission is an encouragement to all of us in our ministries. If we were commissioned to fix the world's social problems, that would be discouraging. The miseries of humanity are a bottomless pit. But rather, we are filling heaven with saints and plundering hell by sharing the message of forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Jesus Christ.⁹¹ We have devoted our lives to the most important work there is.

In the past 13 years as I have served as a professor at MLC, I have repeatedly heard the message that we at MLC and WLS should train our young people to be more mission-minded. Certainly there may be more that we can do along these lines, and I know that we have been trying new things at MLC. Still I have to say what my own personal experience has been. My memory is that when my classmates and I left WLS in 1982, we were on fire to convert the world. We left the seminary very mission-minded. What can happen, however, is that one can lose one's fire after getting beaten up for some years as a parish pastor. Some of the shine wears off when there are intense congregational problems. It has always seemed to me that the main challenge is this: How does one retain his zeal over the long haul of a lifetime in parish ministry? When swamped with the problems of one's own church members, how does one have energy and zeal to reach out with the gospel to others?

Of course we need to go back to the basics, and remember what a glorious Savior we have and what a glorious ministry he has given us.

We have a wonderful message. "God was pleased . . . through him [Christ] to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col 1:19-20). Just as Sherwin-Williams paint "covers the earth" on their company's logo, so the blood of Jesus covers the earth in reality. "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Eph 1:7). "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ro 5:1).

We have a wonderful task. C. F. W. Walther said that we as Christian pastors are like a messengers sent by a king to announce to rebel citizens, "You have been pardoned!"⁹² We are "Christ's ambassadors" (2 Co 5:20). In doing so, we in the Lutheran church know that we are not just sharing information. We are actually distributing the forgiveness of sins. It is a unique Lutheran emphasis that gospel proclamation has inherent power.⁹³

Therefore, those who teach the Word of God are in the "most glorious" estate on earth, Walther says. "If men would stop to consider these points, they would come crowding into the sacred office of the ministry and that of teachers of religion. . . . Young theologians would feel constrained every day to go down on their knees and praise and magnify God's holy name for having done such great things for them, predestinating them from eternity to this exalted and sacred office."⁹⁴

⁹¹ See LW 13:52.

⁹² C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia, 1928), 170.

⁹³ See Erling T. Teigen, "God's Power for Salvation," ELS convention essay, June 15-19, 2008, 6. Referring to Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970), 362.

⁹⁴ Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 285.

Luther once said the tongue of a pastor is like a brush used to sprinkle holy water (an aspergillum). Think of your tongue this way:

The tongue of the preacher or Christian is the aspergillum. He dips it into the rosy-red blood of Christ and sprinkles the people with it, that is, he preaches to them the gospel, which declares that Christ has purchased the forgiveness of sins with his precious blood, that he has poured out his blood on the Cross for the whole world, and that he who believes this has been sprinkled with this blood.⁹⁵

As a Hebrew professor at MLC, I sometimes tell students that I have a great calling. It is as though I have a great treasure chest, and it is my job to hand out treasures day after day. One day I hand out the *qamets hatuf*; another, the energetic *nun*; and another, the double *ayin* verbs. And, of course, then I hand out Jonah and Psalm 1 and Psalm 23, and introduce students for the first time to the God-inspired Hebrew Scriptures. This is the attitude that all of us as WELS pastors can have. We have a great treasure chest, and it is our privilege to hand out treasures from God, day in and day out. The greatest treasure is the forgiveness of sins.⁹⁶ In connection with forgiveness, there is eternal life, the water of Baptism, the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper, a new life of sanctification, the power of prayer, and on and on.

We can be “very bold” (2 Co 3:12). We do not need to “lose heart” (2 Co 4:1, 16). All the days that God gives us on this earth, we can fill our sermons and our teaching with faith-building gospel. We can point sinners to Christ crucified and satisfy their greatest need.

As we come back to this place—where we wrote our first sermons and where we were trained to preach the gospel—may we once again be imbued with the mission of the church. Our seminary has not said more than what is taught in the New Testament.

Preach the gospel!

⁹⁵ LW 51:326.

⁹⁶ See Francis Pieper, *The Church and Her Treasure*, Translated by O. Marc Tangner (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 2007), 52.

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(All are available in the WLS Online Essay File)

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Reaction to: “The Church and Its Ministry” by Rev. Thomas Nass

First, a hearty “Yea and amen” to Professor Nass’s initial point. In current discussions of the doctrines of Church and Ministry, perhaps *the* major obstacle to progress is the bewildering lack of hesitancy on the part of some Lutherans to say more than is clearly taught in Scripture. Prof. Nass approaches his topic with characteristic humility and with a cautiousness that brings the saying of Agur to mind (Proverbs 30:5, 6). Participants in Church- and Ministry-related discussions would do well to emulate his example.

Next, a quibble. I wonder whether it would be fair in every case to characterize ministries of mercy as attempts to “make the world a better place” or to, e.g., “eliminate poverty and hunger.” It seems to me that Lutheran Christians who engage in ministries of mercy are not necessarily that naive. Many of them are fully aware that this world as such is irredeemable, that judgment on it has been passed, and that it will only become a “better place” when the Lord returns. They therefore tend to spare others their insipid babbling about “changing the world” or “making a difference.” Instead, they quietly and efficiently help others whenever they have opportunity, walking as Jesus walked (1 John 2:6) for no other reason than that Jesus walked that way.

In Prof. Nass’s judgment, a lack of clarity about the essence of our mission poses a real threat to the Church today. Recent church history holds no shortage of cautionary tales in support of his view. One could think of private American colleges that were begun as divinity schools and soon became something else entirely. The story of world missions is a prime example. It has been said that the two great recent scandals in world missions are: 1) the overall reduction in the number of career, expatriate missionaries; and 2) the redirection of missionary efforts away from Gospel proclamation and toward purely humanitarian projects. Prof. Nass’s paper points out parallel developments in the Church at home.

It also proposes some likely reasons for this trend. Efforts to help our fellow man and relieve suffering are commanded in Scripture and are undeniably God-pleasing. The unbelieving world has no appreciation whatsoever for Gospel ministry, but applauds those who feed the poor and heal the sick. Persons who will not accept the Gospel from us will often take a sandwich. But a more troubling reason may be a crisis in faith within the Church. It is a commonplace that the social gospel took over within liberal Protestantism as faith in a spiritual gospel waned.

And it is not only in liberal churches where this can happen. Prof. Nass speaks of the results of social ministry as “often tangible, visible, and measurable, unlike the preaching of the gospel” (18). Every pastor knows the feeling. After a long string of sermons, classes, and visits that seem to have accomplished nothing, one begins to wonder what it would be like to be able to count bowls of soup or treated mosquito nets distributed at the end of each day. A missionary friend in Africa once spoke of how tempting it is—and how easy it would be—to develop a ministry based entirely on hauling around bags of cement. As Prof. Nass makes clear, the tragedy then lies not in what is done, but in what is left undone.

One also appreciates Prof. Nass’s explanation of the problematic phrase “social gospel,” in view of the fact that at times it has been used promiscuously in our circles to condemn any and all ministries of mercy within the Church. The danger to the Church posed by liberation theology is certainly worth noting. We must also understand, however, what makes it attractive. In Brazil I had a friend, a devout Roman Catholic, who had been active in liberation movements in the 1970’s. Eager to show off my conservative *bona fide*’s, I asked him how he could ever

have been taken in by a “theology” that isn’t theology at all, but Marxism under a veneer of Christian terminology. He agreed; in time, he had come to understand that my characterization of liberation theology was essentially correct. Then he patiently explained to me that in Latin America in the 1970’s you had a populace that for the most part was desperately poor. You had a laboring class that was being exploited by oligarchs who controlled the means of production and most of the arable land. You had corrupt governments that would stop at nothing to maintain the *status quo*. And the only Christian church that most persons knew stood shoulder to shoulder with their oppressors.

I submit that our remarks about liberation theology will be most effective when they demonstrate a willingness on our part to think our way into a context like that. Imagine yourself facing a church full of peasants and proclaiming a message on issues of social justice that amounts to, “Your child’s empty belly is not the Church’s problem.” Regardless of whether it’s what you’ve said, what you have communicated will be: “This church is just like the rest. It’s on *their* side.” Trading the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins for a mess of this-worldly pottage is certainly not the answer. But neither is denying the reality of exploitation and oppression. They are real, and the Church has every right to address them. “The present great troubles which have come upon our laboring men are not by any means simply a natural necessity. The cause of the trouble is to be found somewhere else, namely, in part, yes almost altogether, in the self-interest, avarice, and selfishness, in the cruelty and heartlessness, and to speak plainly, in the vampirism and the tyrannical oppression of the worker on the part of the rich.....O my brothers, what terms of reproach might not be justly applied to us if we sided with the human vampires and not with the oppressed” (C. F. W. Walther).¹

Typical of the cautiousness and balance of Prof. Nass’s approach is his recognition that the New Testament does not pit ministries of mercy and the proclamation of the Gospel against each other in the same way that it does, e.g., faith and works. Helpfully he describes humanitarian projects as the Church “simply pooling together the fruits of faith of its members” (12). Viewed in this way it is hard to imagine why anyone would find them objectionable.

One could go even further, however. The longest sustained discussion of biblical stewardship in the New Testament is 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, the *Sitz im Leben* of which is a famine relief project. And yet Paul encourages participation in this very material project by means of some very spiritual arguments (2 Corinthians 9:12-15). That suggests that, while Prof. Nass’s cautions are important and well-stated, to keep ministries of mercy and spiritual ministry in separate, airtight compartments would not be to approach the question the way Scripture does. It might even suggest that Scripture does not operate with exactly the same material/spiritual dichotomy that we generally do.

We thank Prof. Nass for his encouragement to keep in mind that our task as Church is simply to “preach the Gospel.” At the same time, hearts touched by the Gospel are inevitably moved by their neighbor’s needs—physical as well as spiritual. When we preach the Gospel, we can expect our hearers to want to demonstrate their love for one another and for the world in tangible ways. We will give them all the encouragement and direction that we can, conscious that “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mind, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

Prof. Kenneth A. Cherney, Jr.

¹ *Communism and Socialism*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1879, p 36. Quoted in John F. Brug, “The Lutheran Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms: Current Problems Concerning Christian Citizenship and the Separation of Church and State,” Summer 1999 Pastors’ Institute.