

How Much Room is there on the Church's Agenda for Social Issues?

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Wisconsin Synod essayists usually begin with a complaint about the difficulty or the scope or the vagueness of the assigned theme, with a description of the difficulties the research has entailed, and with a reference to the time limitations that have hampered the quality of the finished product. This essay is the exception to the rule.

No complaints about the theme on the score of vagueness are being registered at the outset. Who could find fault on that score with the theme your essay committee assigned to me? That theme reads: "The extent to which the church may become involved in social issues. Is the voice of the church exclusively restricted to gospel proclamation." The intent and thrust are unmistakable, as unmistakable as 23 words and a double statement can make them. You will not, however, fault the essayist if he, for working purposes condenses this to: "How Much Room is there on the Church's Agenda for Social Issues?"

Neither is there any reason to point to special difficulties encountered when writing on the theme in either the thorough declaration or the epitome form. Actually the basic considerations that come into play are clearly set forth in a minimum of classic passages in the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. The result is that they leave little room for doubt or disagreement among those who submit unreservedly to those standards. In our church body throughout its history there has been a remarkable consensus on these underlying principles.

By the same token, the application of these principles to specific situations often involves a variety of viewpoints and variables and verdicts. Expressions of opinion in such a situation do not pose any great risk. Disagreement with that opinion is, in fact, to be expected and need not provoke undue embarrassment. The theme you have assigned presents no great research problems. It has been treated, sometimes mistreated, on previous occasions; it will be retreated at other conferences in other years. The writing on the subject is, in fact, so vast that any attempt at a complete bibliography is made impossible by time and space limitations. Writing on the subject goes back at least to 1907 when Walter Rauschenbusch published his *Christianity and the Social Crisis* and began the modern "social gospel" movement.ⁱ The subject has been treated expressly and extensively in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* as recently as 1975 when Professor Schuetze was requested by the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Forum to publish his Forum essay, "The Church's Social Concerns—Scriptural Imperatives and Limitations."ⁱⁱ

A few other references to the literature on the subject will have to suffice. Martin Scharlemann's *The Church's Social Responsibilities* is a book most of you no doubt know.ⁱⁱⁱ It is mild in its views when compared to the utterances on the subject that have been provided by William Lazareth, the well-known Lutheran Church in America activist theologian.

This *captatio benevolentiae* preamble can conclude with a commendation of this conference's good judgment in matters of time and space. You assign the task so far in advance that no time problem could have been foreseen when the assignment was made and none should have resulted in its completion.

Your original promise to hold this conference on this metropolitan area's north side was kept. The result was that today's enjoyable junket was not longer than necessary and provided the essayist the opportunity to visit for the first time this city with its interests for the church history.

All this adds up to the hope that you will be as gratified and satisfied at the conclusion of this venture as I have been all along. A scheme of the writing is before you. The first of the three major sections has the title,

The Abiding Assignment

The reference is of course to the three-word summary of what the Lord's church and believers are to do first, last and always—"Preach the gospel."

At the outset we remind ourselves that, not we, but the Lord of the Church makes the assignments. We pledge ourselves to obedience to that Lord's injunctions and to a commitment to the assignments He gives. We tell ourselves to obey the Lord who gives the assignment!

Κηρύξατε Τὸ Εὐαγγέλιον—No graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary could ever forget this inscription in its chapel. Every one of his school days at the Seminary began with the reminder that the Lord wanted for the church and the world that He had redeemed ministers who would always remember that their primary mission was to "Preach the gospel."

That terse assignment is compelling for us, not just because it is written in letters of gold on a chapel wall, and not just because it has been thereby inscribed indelibly in our remembering hearts. The Word remains our abiding assignment because our Lord spoke it and caused it to be written down in the Scriptures. With the time of his visible dwelling here on this earth winding down to the zero hour and with all His concerns centered on what would be best for the spokesmen He had selected; for the church He had founded and for the world He had redeemed, the Lord Jesus summed up His farewell instruction in three words. They resounded over the hill and over the world, for the twelve then and for us today: "Preach the gospel."

Four hundred and fifty years ago, less seven months and twelve days, the brave confessors who became the founding fathers of our Lutheran Church were called upon to give an account of themselves before their emperor because of their activities that were dividing the church. They had to ask themselves the basic questions and to face fundamental concerns: What is the church and what is its work?

Their answer came clear and compelling at Augsburg. It has been a benchmark of Lutheranism ever since. What makes the church tick, what gives it being, what creates its unity is one thing and one thing only: the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. That *satis est* of Augustana VII reiterates the Lord's abiding assignment to the church. It relegates less basic considerations to a *nec necesse* classification.

Augustana VII does not make us antinomians who stop preaching the law. It does not ask us to view any doctrine of Scripture as meaningless in denominational demarcation or expendable in fellowship considerations. It should go without saying in this gathering that preaching the gospel effectively implies the gospel proclamation will be heralded by the message of the law, will be followed by instruction in righteousness, and will be ringed by edification in the whole council of God.

The point and purpose, however, will remain the saving message of redemption for sinners by the merit and blood of God's Son offered them in the gospel and appropriated by faith. The terrors of the law are antecedent; the guidelines in godliness are subsequent; the gospel is the center, the goal, the source, the heart. "Preach the gospel!"

While there are always weaknesses in drawing conclusions from the argument of silence alone, in this matter it is fair to ask exponents of more social action in the church: Where is your *sedes*? Where is the New Testament Church given such an assignment? Why did the Lord of the church say, "Preach the gospel" and not add a companion social gospel affirmation if that is what he wants?

We are convinced that He did not so add because He does not so want. We have His own testimony at Pilate's tribunal: "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36). His concern is the realm of the spirit. His church is to win hearts by and for the gospel. He keeps his assignment simple because He wants us to keep our priorities straight. We are to keep first things first!

What are our "first things?" The one thing needful is the soul's salvation, ours and others. We have heard the Master ask: "What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul" (Mt 16:26). We know the right answer. The salvation of souls is our business. The gospel is the only means to that end. "Preach the gospel!"

It is of supreme importance that we keep this first thing first. If we don't who is there to mind the store? The world has an abundance of political programmers and economic theorists and social engineers. They come a dime a dozen, even the best of them. But until the crack of dawn and the light of eternity there is only one agency for saving sinners, the church, and only one tool the church has for this task, the gospel. "Preach the gospel!"

There have always been those inside and outside the church who have assumed that the gospel of Christ and His church was essentially a message of morality, a guide to godliness, a lesson for living, an enunciation of ethics. The Pharisees thought that in Christ's day, the Humanists thought that in the Reformation era. The Deists thought that when our country was coming into being. Millions on the rolls of the Christian churches think that today.

Why should we add to our problems by encouraging that erroneous viewpoint? Whenever the church overexerts itself about legislative programs, it does just that—adds to its problems. One of the stock temptations of the Tempter is just this lure of involvement in the kingdoms of this world. If the temptation succeeds, who is left to worry about the preaching of the gospel? And if no gospel is preached, the Tempter has won battle, war, everything.

There always have been those outside and inside the church who have shuffled life's priorities and put temporal concerns above those that matter more. The Bible has its example from Saul and Solomon to Ananias and Sapphira. Luther was agitated about a church that trafficked in relics and trifled with sins and about church members who let the business of money getting and money spending interfere with their own eternal well being and with the spiritual nurture of their children. America in the last decades of the Twentieth Century is a veritable breeding ground for the soul malaise of materialism and the sin of greed.

Why should we add to our problems by presenting to those whom we want to see busy in the laying up of heavenly treasures a view of the church that reveals the very opposite in the way of programs and goals. The church's "liberation" theology cannot but confirm men in the error that freedom from sin, death, and the power of the devil just isn't all that important. Pulpit agitation about equal rights can't help but obscure the old lesson taught by the birds in the heavens and the blooms on the heath. When the church joins the mad rush for a higher standard of living, when it marches for economic causes at the head of the parade, the faithful will be misled and the cause of the gospel will be rendered disservice. We should march to a different drumbeat, the drumbeat that sounds for us from the other side.

There have always been millennialists in the ranks of Christ's followers, also in the Lutheran variety. In these bad last days the millennial error is making serious inroads, attacking those seemingly most concerned about the Scriptures.

Why should we add to our problems by a social action program that makes it look as though the church's ultimate concern and mission is the visible establishment of Christ's heavenly kingdom here on this poor earth of ours in our own bad time? Even the most subtle millennialism carries with it the threat of turning a religion of hope into a *hic et nunc* affair. Even the slightest encouragement of such an error that undermines the gospel must consequently be avoided. First things must remain first for Christ's followers. For them the watchword is: "Preach the gospel." Another way to approach this matter is via the route of the old proverb, *Schuster, bleib, bei deinem Leisten!*

The proverb confronts us with the homely empiricism that getting the job done requires proper tools, that a proper tool for one job is not necessarily that for other tasks, that the right tool for the job must also be used in the right way. All this has a specific application to the issue before us.

We are the Lord's workmen—craftsmen, if you will. He has given us a job to do—save and sanctify sinners, serve and preserve saints. He has supplied the necessary tools to get the job done—His Word and Sacraments. All this is implicit in His abiding assignment to us: "Preach the gospel!"

Let no one ever imagine that the Lord has somehow shortchanged the church in its task for Him, has left it unendowed and inefficient in this modern come-of-age world. From such erroneous thinking comes the desire

to “improve” on Christ’s arrangements and set up both new rules for the game and to change the name of the game.

For saving and sanctifying sinners and serving and preserving saints we need no better tools than those provided, Word and Sacraments. The law message convicts sinners and the gospel message converts them into the saints of God. These saints are served on their earthly pilgrimage and preserved for their heavenly habitation by the same Word and Sacraments. This again is nothing more or less than preaching the gospel.

How law and gospel and sacraments are to be employed as tools in carrying out this endeavor should be obvious to all. One point in this consideration of tools might be worthy of special consideration. That is the issue of the message of the church to the unconverted.

Obviously the church will want to confront the unconverted with the mirror use of the law, not as an end in itself but to prepare the way for the preaching of the gospel. What, however, is to be done about those that remain unconverted? Should the church over against them exert itself in a curb use of the law?

Cui bono? At best the church will thereby only be playing a secondary role. The Lord has already written into the hearts of sinful men His law and has supplied all sinners with a conscience. Both the written law and the conscience with its commending and accusing judgment play the curb role. By trying to confront the unconverted with the curb use of the law the church will be doing no more than fortifying or reestablishing what God has already provided. It will, however, not be moving one inch nearer its assignment of preaching the gospel to save souls.

This concept of tools and uses of tools can be enhanced by the negative viewpoint. What are tools the church doesn’t possess and cannot use? The church does not have a sword. Peter put his aside at the Lord’s admonition in Gethsemane’s Garden. The church’s use of the sword in the crusade era proved to be the ultimate in fiasco. The sword, as Romans 13 describes it, is God’s own special tool for curbing evil doing. He has, however, not given that sword to His church.

Another tool that is foreign to the church is the legal weapon, the legislative program on which social action ultimately rests. Certainly the church is concerned in the first and in the last instance about the inimitable will of God. That abides. That never changes. That has enduring influence.

What must be remembered, however, is that special legislation have been abrogated for the New Testament church. You all know the classic passage in Colossians 2. The church simply cannot be exercised about pieces of legislation if it takes that passage seriously. The moral issues behind the legislation are a matter of concern but the varying application of those issues is a matter that can better be left to the judgment of the unwritten law so that the preaching of the gospel might not be impaired.

A case in point is sabbath legislation. We have been taught by Luther’s 450 year old Catechism to value the spiritual implication of the Old Testament ordinance “Remember the Sabbath-day to keep it holy.” We don’t want to “despise preaching and His Word.” We hold that Word “sacred.” We couldn’t, however, care less, as exponents of God’s Word and Will, how the local government regulates activities of its citizens on any given Sunday. What we desire is that the gospel be preached and believed on Sunday after Sunday.

When the wrong tool is used for the job at hand or when a good tool is utilized for the wrong job or is incorrectly applied to the right job, disaster can result. These are truisms that are frequently ignored as the church goes about its endeavors.

In United States history the classic example remains the XVIII Amendment. Legalistic Protestants insisted on the “noble experiment.” It flopped miserably because the ethical principle involved had already been abandoned at the time the amendment was enacted. Legalistic Protestantism has not yet recovered from the results. It has even showed itself unwilling to stand up unequivocally for the rejection of abortion on demand. Let young David be our example. Having tried borrowed armor and weapons, he put them aside as impractical and inhibiting. The tool that the Lord had supplied him of old was his choice of weapons. The tool served well. A victory for the Lord resulted.

In this consideration of basic assignments some attention should also be given the admonition that we respect the Kingdom on the left

Here some repetition is unavoidable. Obedience to the Lord who ordained government, recognition of that government's "first things," awareness of assigned goals and supplied tools are once again involved. To avoid wearisome redundancy, a minimum of exposition will be employed in this section.

It is classic Lutheran doctrine that God has ordained earthly government, has given it specific assignments and has provided tools and aids necessary to carry out the assignment. The key Scripture basis is Romans 13, The most complete confessional exposition is Article XVI in Augustana, "Of Civil Affairs," and in the Apology, "Of Political Power." The Apology writer insists that "this entire topic concerning civil affairs" has been "clearly set forth by our theologians."^{iv}

Operating with reason, with the unwritten law and conscience, and with its God-given sword, the state can create a decent society here on earth. It can check evildoers for it "beareth not the sword in vain." It can promote the good for it "is the minister of God... for good."^v

Most important, as Romans 13 makes plain, the government merits the Christian's support. This begins with obedience, moves through service and culminates in appreciation. Neither obedience nor service nor appreciation is being manifested when the church plunges into social action as though either there were no divinely ordained state for such endeavors or there were no hopes for any constructive action on the part of the state.

The state can get the social action job done without benefit of clergy. History supplies numerous examples. The pagan Roman Republic with its high standards in private and public moral behavior and patriotic service comes immediately to mind.

When the state bogs down, as seems to be the case in our time, the proper treatment is not bypass, but improvement. The need of the hour is, not less, but more concern and more regard for God's ordinance, the state, troubled and beleaguered though it be. Weakness in government is no excuse for the church to usurp the role of the state. History suggests that such usurpation invites total disaster for both parties. The most telling injunctions to respect government that we have in the Scriptures and Confessions were written in days when the state was not by any means excelling in the social action field.

The more one considers the basic factors involved, the less one is inclined to grant time on the church's agenda for social action. The Lord's specific assignments for the church, the overriding importance of its spiritual tasks, the special tools that have been placed at its disposal, and the mutual regard the kingdoms on the right and on the left are to have for each other, all these fundamental issues testify emphatically in the direction of a scrupulous and deliberate noninvolvement on the part of the church in the social action field.

An Indirect Involvement

The key word in the previous summary sentence is "deliberate." Like it or not, the church is very much involved in an indirect way in all that is implied in the term "social action." In fact, one can muster abundant evidence to support the thesis that the best outcomes in the social action area are achieved when the church is least conscious of any social action role. This is actually what the second major section of this writing is all about. The first subhead states that the church is indirectly involved in social action gains--by sanctified members, not by legislative programs

"Ye are the salt of the earth." This is more than a mere slogan that does not reflect realities. This is God's truth. The believers have time and again demonstrated that they are actually the salt of this sinful earth, working veritable miracles in the social action arena without benefit of bluster, bludgeoning or bloodshed, simply letting the gospel have its sway in their daily lives.

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.

This does not guarantee the millennium. It does, however, provide a chance at the best of all possible worlds eastward and westward and northward and southward of Eden. Mistakes can result along the way. The biggest mistake is to frustrate that potential of the sanctified citizen by turning him off through a specific social action effort for which he has no heart. No one will ever know this side of eternity how much sanctification potential died aborning because of a fund drive for Beecher Bibles in 1859 or for revolutionary weapons in 1979. It has been said that the single most important cause for Presbyterian decline in our day is the church grant for the defense of a non-Presbyterian, Angelo Davis.^{vi}

The point is that the church serves the true social justice program best when it sticks to its appointed tasks of preaching the gospel to provide the means for the sinner's justification and the motivation for his sanctification. If problems result, it may be because of a failure of the church to provide the necessary sanctification guidance.

A case in point in America's tragedy, the Civil War. This essayist would be hard put to fault the Virginia clergy in 1859 for not being outright abolitionists. He is, however, strongly inclined to score and scorn their silence regarding Virginia's slave breeding and selling role. God's Word and will regarding family, also for black families, was not included in sermonic instruction. The whole proposition may be of the "iffy" variety, but the argument is cogent: an actual commitment to the church's assigned task could have been as effective in preventing the Civil War as abolition agitation on the part of the Franckean Synod and others was in providing causation for an "irrepressible conflict." What was needed was more preaching of the whole counsel of God, not more involvement in the burning social action issues of that day.

The indirect involvement of the church in social action is also occasioned by corporate charity, not by social engineering.

Individual believers will always be demonstrating charity and will thus be playing a role as salt of the earth in many areas in which social activists are very much interested. That goes, if not without saying, at least without additional elaboration.

What is less obvious and what occasions some problems in the area with which the assigned topic deals, is the so-called corporate act of charity in which believers jointly pool their efforts in a charitable endeavor. The single believer is eager to feed the hungry neighbor he encounters. By the same token a group of believers, a congregation of believers, a denomination of believers will want to feed a multitude of starving souls in a famine-stricken land. No one could conceivably quarrel with that charitable impulse and action.

Such acts of corporate charity should not, however, be misread as a justification for corporate social engineering. It is one thing for a church body to rush aid to earthquake victims; it is an altogether different matter when a church body seeks to redistribute the wealth in a country in the interests of the poor through massive political action. In the one case a group of Christians simply followed an impulse of their love for the neighbor; in the other the church has begun to invade the domains of the state and function with alien means and tools.

Let no one imagine that the group of believers is thereby inhibited in its desire to do good and that much more permanent gains could be accomplished through social engineering. In fact, actual results indicate quite the contrary. So often the well-intentioned social engineering effort brings more harm than good. Members and prospective members with differing views are alienated. The issues are seldom so clear-cut that the church can infallibly select the proper course. Church bodies have campaigned and demonstrated and resolved against nuclear power and for ecology; they may find themselves in the future closing their doors because of high fuel bills they cannot pay. Churches worked hard to control the drinking habits of members and nonmembers; they ended up with crime waves and scofflaw views they never bargained for at the outset.

The large acts of corporate charity have been a blessing, an unmixed blessing, for all concerned, both givers and receivers. War relief, refugee resettlement, medical missions-these are but a few terms of many that make the point that the church's corporate charities are more productive than any attempt at social engineering.

Closely related to this indirect involvement of the church in social action via corporate charity is an involvement by corporate action, not as the state's conscience

One of the special concerns your program committee communicated to me was contained in this quotation from the chairman's letter:

The brethren voiced concern as to whether we as a synod are being consistent in the way in which we are dealing with such issues as tax exemption and abortion and the like. In the one case we are urged to write letters and our synod officials make special appearances, etc., while we hear no such support for "Right to Life" movements and the like. What, if anything, should our synod be doing along these lines?^{vii}

Omitting for a moment the abortion reference, one could suggest that the tax issue should really not be that much of a problem. Whether it wants it that way or not, the gathering of believers as congregation or conference or district or synod or denomination is forced to live in a world, where articles of incorporation and legislative enactments come into play.

Permit a teacher of "Lutheranism in America" to inject an interesting interpolation and a developing digression at this point. Among Lutheran groupings the Tennessee Synod was a *rara avis* also in the matter of resisting incorporation.^{viii} From our vantage point, far removed in time and space, one could surmise that this objection to incorporation was a manifestation of the fears expressed in the letter just quoted: any incorporation action could lead to too much social action and mixture of church and state.

It should be plain, however, that when Board of Trustees Executive Huebner speaks to and asks you to speak to the state on matters of taxation or equal rights, such speaking falls into the area of the civil rights of the corporate body or bodies. This is not a matter of ultimate concern. This is a matter of legal entity within the larger body reacting to a legislative proposal. There is nothing wrong in doing that; God's endorsement of the two kingdoms makes this plain. Confusion could result if an opposition course were pursued. God knows, and you and I know too from our own experience, that confusion in the relation between the two kingdoms must be avoided, as Augustana XXVIII insists.^{ix}

The state does exercise control over areas in which the corporate congregational and denominational grouping of believers is involved. Health and safety matters are obvious cases in point. Long familiarity with them enables us to cope here without stress or stain. Newer controls, such as neighborhood zoning or minimum wages, are really not that much different in kind. The only real difference is our relatively recent acquaintance with them.

There is, however, no compelling reason why in such areas that are in the state's domain the corporate body of the church should not exercise all the rights and privileges and duties and responsibilities it shares with other corporate bodies and with the individual citizen. In such exercise the corporate body will obey, and pay, will petition and lobby, will act as defendant or plaintiff.

Problems result only when that legitimate role of a segment within the state's domain is exceeded, when the church endeavors to dictate the state's course of action, when it seeks to serve, in the sectarian sense, as the conscience of the state. It happens that religious groups, either from an exaggerated sense of self-importance or from a selfish position that is willing to exert spiritual blackmail, pressure the state into legislative enactments to their liking. That is the confusion of the two kingdoms which Augustana XXVIII says must be avoided.

No doubt all here will agree with the previous line of argument so long as the legislative enactment the church is seeking involves a minor or parochial or limited or selfish viewpoint. None of us would march on behalf of any Adventist drive for Saturday blue laws or for a Mormon effort to legitimize polygamy.

What is our viewpoint, however, when the issue gets down to basics, to clashes with God's clearly revealed immutable will to such life-and-death issues as abortion on demand or situation ethics euthanasia? This is a subject best treated in a section that will deal with the church's indirect involvement in social action by proclaiming the word, not by regulating non-members.

The pastor, the congregation, the church society, the synod that is not these days speaking out clearly and unequivocally from its proper fora on such matters not worthy of the name of a Christian grouping. We are

for the Fifth Commandment. We are against abortion on demand and situation ethics euthanasia and both our constituency and those without within hearing distance had better get the message.

A more difficult decision is the matter of prescriptive legislative action in such instances. We would hope our testimony would fortify dulled consciences and rouse sleeping consciences. But there are limits to what can be accomplished. Even theocratic Israel had to yield in the matter of divorce because of the deep sleep of consciences and the deeper sleep of hardened hearts.

We may not like the divorce situation in our land. We have to live with it and in the meantime we continue to testify to God's will in the matter, most especially to those within our care but also to those without as opportunity provides. We must, however, be wary of the all-out effort to legislate compliance with God's will for marriage on the part of those who have in hardness of heart moved beyond a tolerance of divorce to a position of not bothering with marriage while enjoying its sexual prerogatives.

Would each of you parade and persuade on behalf of an amendment to forbid all abortion on demand effective January 1, 1980? Some of us might not be so inclined at the moment. We might fear the fiasco that could result from even the best of legislation that flies in the face of the prevailing mores of community and country. Back-alley abortion mills on a widespread basis might be the greater evil unless dulled consciences are first quickened. That cannot be done by mere legislation. What is required is more testimony of the kind the church can provide much more ably than it can guide legislative construction, enactment and enforcement.

Behind this issue being discussed looms the theological question of use of the law. As Article V and VI of the Formula of Concord plainly demonstrates, the believer in his dual nature needs to be the beneficiary of all three uses of the law. What about the unconverted? Clearly they have no part in the third use which is exclusively of concern to the converted. What of the curb use? Certainly our testimony against sin may spill over to them and may indirectly put a brake on their Old Adam. That, however, is not our abiding concern regarding the unconverted. Because we are to preach the gospel, we confront the unconverted with the mirror use of the law to pave the way for the gospel message. This we must always remember in our social concerns.

A final section of this paper is headed:

Some Perplexing Problems

A heading that indicates when this topic's basic principles and broad applications have been considered, some unresolved issues could remain that call for brief comment. Some of these comments direct themselves to a worsening situation that confronts us.

No one really likes to play a Cassandra role, especially when speaking about future prospects for the church. It would be unrealistic, however, not to expect that our problems in the social action area are going to get worse. Several factors make that inevitable from a human viewpoint.

For one thing, the obvious decline in public morality in our time and in our land, a decline that is enveloping family and government and other basic supports of human society on earth, suggests that more and more problems will invite more and more social action.

For another, bigness is involved—big government, big churches, big social problems. What were once individual and family and local concerns have become the target of massive social action on the part of the government and other big agencies. In such a situation the individual Christian's sanctification tends to get lost in the shuffle.

Another obvious factor is the habit-forming aspect of social action. Some of us can recall the hue and cry over the infant social programs of our government in the 1930's that aren't even peanuts in the light of what goes on in Washington and Springfield today. One social action effort always begets others.

So it is also when the church's involvement is concerned. Back in 1922 these objections to Federal Council of Churches membership were voiced at a convention of a Lutheran church body: "because it was inclined to set up machinery seeking to have the world follow Christian principles without being converted to such principles."^x

This wasn't a convention of the Wisconsin or the Missouri Synod. This wasn't a convention of one of the conservative Lutheran bodies in the Midwest. This was the third convention of the United Lutheran Church in America, the parent body of the very activist Lutheran Church in America.

How will we be able to react in that worsening situation? Will it be possible for us to make right decisions in those circumstances? What will be required will be a steady application of the principles previously enunciated, especially the three-word summary, "Preach the gospel."

When the application of these principles places us before difficult choices and on the horns of a dilemma, we will have to be specially careful. Over the years the essayist has developed for his own use in such situations, a helpful guide which you may find helpful also.

It involves distinguishing between the gospel we are to preach and the social gospel at key points and then letting the results of the comparison help determine our involvement or noninvolvement in the proposed project.

When it comes to concern, the gospel of Christ points to creeds and deeds, the other gospel to deeds.

When it comes to tools, the gospel is the tool with the law serving it, while the other gospel works with laws.

When it comes to target, the gospel aims at the sinner and his conversion, while the other gospel aims at society and its transformation.

When it comes to program, the gospel advocates faith working by love, while the other gospel calls for a sharing of wealth and rights.

When it comes to the final goal, the gospel points to the hope of heaven, while the other gospel wants to build a heaven on this poor earth of ours.

When participation in a certain project is examined in this way and the result is weighted heavily in the direction of the social gospel, then nonparticipation is the better policy. The issue, however, will not always be clear-cut. Sometimes proper involvement and improper involvement is separated by no more than a thin line.

In some situations we might be disinclined to have our congregation or synod participate in a certain social action project. We might, however, decide to participate as individual citizens rather than pastors. It may be relatively easy for some pastors to keep such roles separate, while other pastors in their situation do not have the luxury.

One of my conference brethren regularly appears in anti-abortion marching and picketing. He does this in good conscience. Other members of that conference do not share in such activity, also with a good conscience.

This is not to suggest that anything and everything is up for grabs in the social action area in a kind of situation ethics pastoral theology. Principles previously enunciated make that an impossibility. What is suggested, is that in a difficult situation, our application of the principles may vary from person to person. Respect for a differing, but conscientious, decision is in order.

Finally, permit a teacher of Reformation History to close with a Luther lesson.

The situation is the rising of the peasants in the early Reformation years. They assembled, formulated demands that in some cases had religious implications, and pressed for action. Obviously, nobles and landlords, sometimes bishops, were not overly enthusiastic.

The peasants appealed to Luther because he was the Reformer and because he was respected by both sides. He responded because the gospel was being misinterpreted and because the peasants promised to be guided by the Word.

He wrote an *Admonition to Peace*, instructing both princes and peasants and appealing to both to avoid unchristian action, but the writing in the main favored the just causes of the peasants.

You know what happened. Radical reformers led the peasants into violent action. Appalled, Luther wrote his *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*.

By this time, however, united action by the nobles was winning out. The victors celebrated by slaughtering the vanquished. Appalled a second time, Luther wrote his *Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against*

the Peasants, pointing out that earlier wrongs of the peasants did not justify the subsequent wrongs of the nobles. By this time Luther had had it in this social action venture.

There were reasons why Luther let himself get involved, cogent reasons. The gospel was being misinterpreted. Religious issues were involved. The peasants promised to yield to instruction from the Word. Luther was asked to give such guidance. Luther wanted to avoid civil strife and bloodshed. One can well see why Luther chose to intervene.

But despite this compelling motivation and despite his good intentions Luther ended up the scapegoat, blamed by nobles for egging on the peasants and blamed by peasants for egging on the nobles in their program of punishment.

The lesson is plain. If even Luther, involved for very good reasons, came to grief in this social action venture, we have all the more reason to be wary of giving social action room on the church's agenda. Luther was much more effective, in fact unbelievably effective, when he proclaimed the gospel and let princes and courts and governments settle social problems.

“Preach the gospel!”

Endnotes

ⁱ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, ed. by Robert Cross (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

ⁱⁱ Armin Schuetze, “The Church's Social Concerns—Scriptural Imperatives and Limitations”, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, LXXII (April 1975), pp. 146-164.

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

^{iv} Apology XVI, 65.

^v Both citations are from Romans 13:4.

^{vi} John R. Fry, *The Trivialization of the United Presbyterian Church*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1975.) p. 38.

^{vii} Letter from John Zickuhr to the essayist dated Jan. 31, 1979.

^{viii} F. Bente, *American Lutheranism*, I. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1919), p. 221-223.

^{ix} *Augustana* XXVIII, 12.

^x The quotation is from p. 27 of an unpublished monograph of D. Flesner, “American Lutherans Help Shape the World Council of Churches.”