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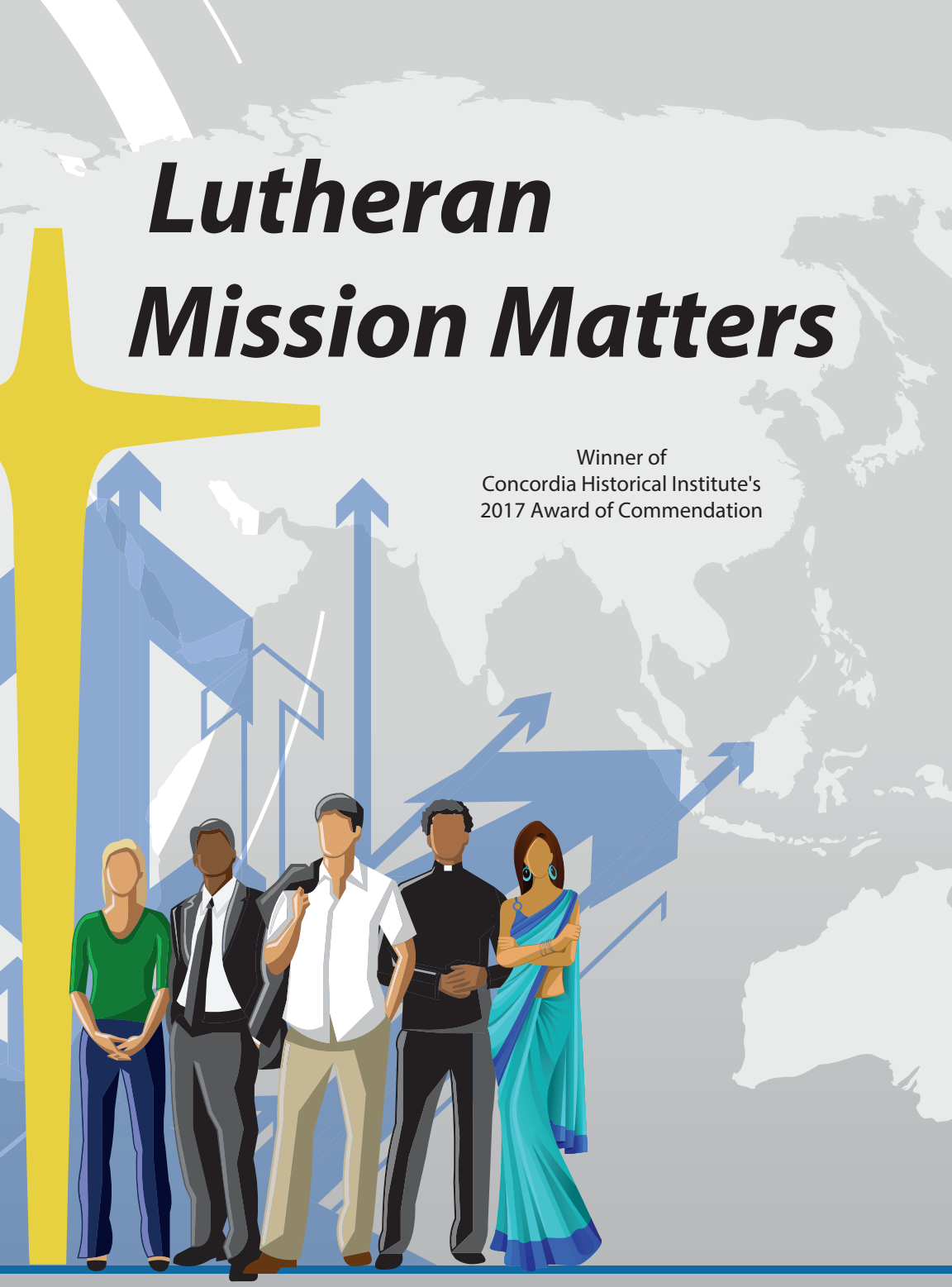

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Inbox

Confessing the One True God in the Context of Public Interreligious Events

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In the polytheistic arena of an increasingly "small world," for a Christian invited to participate with representatives of non-Christian religions in public religious events, the issues are primarily scriptural and secondarily practical. The hazards, far outweighing any expectations of effective Christian confession or proclamation of the Gospel, justify—even demand—an explained absence.

Scriptural "lenses"

Scriptural "lenses" through which to observe and evaluate civic religious events are at least threefold: (1) the First (foremost) Commandment (Ex 20:3 and Mt 22:37–40); (2) paradigmatic events (1 Kgs 18 and Acts 17); and (3) clear apostolic directives for the Christian life (1 Cor 10:14ff. and 2 Cor 6:14ff.).

The First Commandment

In Exodus 20, God speaks clearly: His people are to have no other gods before Him. In Matthew 22:37–40, Jesus explicates the First Commandment for the Pharisees. Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. This is the "first and greatest commandment." Note that the First Commandment takes precedence over the Second. Love for neighbor follows and is based upon love for God. In a multireligious event, the stakes are high—overwhelmingly high. A Christian who risks participating obligates himself to give clear, unambiguous witness to the triune God as the one true God, of whom all other "gods" are but false, demonic imitations. Absent that, he has violated the First Commandment, for we are to have no other gods before Him, i.e., in addition to or in His presence. And what of the Second Commandment in such circumstances? Love your neighbor as yourself. To that we respond: What greater love for a neighbor can be shown than to witness to him of the one true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and of the one and only hope of his salvation? It is the very antithesis of love to imply the religious validity of a collection of clerics on a public platform, regardless of their professed beliefs. Christians are to let charity prevail in their dealings with others, but it is God who defines love.

Elijah and the prophets of Baal

In 1 Kings, Elijah is acting in the midst of national crisis and suffering—in this case, drought and famine. The analog in our civic culture is a disaster or crisis, when

high emotions tempt people to blur religious distinctions on a public platform to emphasize unity. To be sure, Elijah shares a platform (Mt. Carmel) with the priests of Baal. Observe, however, how Elijah relates to his Baalite peers. Does he respectfully listen to their prayers and then offer his own as one of several equally valid petitions? Hardly. Read Elijah's plea to the people (v. 21). Read his prayer (vv. 36–37). Read the whole account. We may be uncomfortable with Elijah's (God's) method, but we dare not ignore the clear message that God does not tolerate other gods in His presence. Only He is the God of Israel. If, under the New Testament, we do not slaughter the priests of false gods, we surely avoid even the implication or appearance that they are representatives of equal and valid religions.

Paul and the Areopagus

For a positive example of Christian presence in a public polytheistic context, we refer to Paul's Athenian experience (Acts 17). In Athens, where idols were common, Paul is preaching the "good news about Jesus and the resurrection." When asked to meet at the Areopagus, he doesn't flinch. Risking sneers (there were some) and ridicule, he again preaches the resurrection, upon the hearing of which some say, "We want to hear you again on this subject." As a result, "a few men became followers of Paul and believed." No mocking or slaughter of false prophets this time, just clear proclamation of the Truth. Paul meets the followers of other "gods" on their own turf and leads them to the Gospel. Note, however, that the context is neither a prayer service nor a formal religious event of any kind. Can one even imagine Paul's engaging in serial prayer or a rite of worship with or among unbelievers? Why not? He explains clearly in quite another context.

Paul again—God's Word for the "Corinthians" of the twenty-first century

In his Epistles to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul provides clear, practical "thou shalt not" applications of both commandments, even (especially) for today. In 1 Corinthians 10:20 he warns: "the sacrifices [and surely the prayers] of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons." What Christian would choose or dare to participate with demons? In 2 Corinthians 6:14ff., Paul charges believers not to be yoked—especially, and obviously, in a religious context—with idolaters or unbelievers. That is, they should not put their spiritual welfare and the spiritual welfare of others, fellow believers as well as unbelievers, at such risk. "What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? . . . between the temple of God and idols?" Rhetorical questions, to be sure. To put it bluntly: Avoid illicit religious relations. Could any scriptural warnings be more relevant to contemporary multireligious events? There is no ambiguity here. The ambiguity resides in our culturally conditioned minds, which, by the way, may also tempt us to regard references to "demons" and "Belial" as archaic. Yet we know that God's Word applies to us and our time, that our world is spiritually no different from the world of Paul. God's faithful people have always had to live and interact

with unbelievers and anti-believers. Our twenty-first century world offers nothing new under the sun in that respect. These clear words of Scripture are no rigid or out-of-context proof-texting. They are at the heart of the matter, for the Corinthians and for us.

Note that Paul does not limit prohibition against such yoking to prayers or worship with vested clergy. The proscription is general: "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. . . . What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?" Lest we misunderstand his meaning, Paul defines and clarifies: "For we are the temple of the living God." It is not only in a temple ("built with hands") or a church or a mosque that a Christian avoids participating in prayer or worship with unbelievers. Rather, we Christians, who are the very "temple of God" (cf. 1 Cor 6:19), avoid any yoking—in actions or contacts—that would cause us or our neighbor to offend God or to confuse false gods with the one true God. Could Paul have put it any more directly? Call such events what one will—"civic event with religious content," "prayer service," etc.—it matters not. Do not be yoked!

What of the claim that a Muslim cleric or Jewish rabbi in some sense believes in "the one true God"? While the claim may provide a basis for theological discussion and, in an appropriate context, even an opportunity for evangelism, it has no relevance to a public interreligious worship context, where important distinctions can't be made.

Practical matters—important, but secondary to the scriptural

Even aside from these clear scriptural prohibitions, given all the hazards of such events, we must conclude that opportunities for Christians to witness in a multireligious civic event that includes any aspect of worship, e.g., prayer, are essentially nonexistent. The most common public perceptions at such events—despite any good intentions of the Christian or his well-meant words—are that

a. all participants have an equally valid "prayer path" to God.

b. tolerance of each other's religious beliefs is more important than the Truth.

In America, for example, it is only good civic manners when religious representatives gather on the same platform not to assert religious claims too seriously (certainly not exclusively) or to promote one religion at the expense of another. Ultimately, public prayer in a context of polytheistic civil religion is neither a proper means nor a setting for clear proclamation. Once one agrees to play by the rules of pluralistic public etiquette, it is all but impossible to proclaim that the Triune God is not one choice among others, but that He is the one true God and that Jesus is "*the* Way." Such a claim is seen as fractious, a violation of a tacit gentleman's agreement and rejection of the contemporary religion of diversity. Exclusivity is a most unwelcome interloper in the public religious context. A participant who makes exclusive claims at a multireligious civic event is far more likely to alienate ("Who does he think *he* is?") or to confuse ("Why is he here?") than to provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to open hearts to the Gospel.

The matter of perceptions

If we are to let love for the neighbor prevail, charity toward the weak in faith and those who lack faith in Christ means—at the very least—avoiding any act that confuses or alienates. Despite his best intentions, the Christian who participates in prayer or other religious activity on a platform with representatives of other religions must understand that he exercises little or no control over the perceptions that accompany his presence. Indeed, a presence that suggests to the spiritually weak or unenlightened that there are many paths to God is loveless in the extreme. For example, in regard to participation in an interreligious service some years ago following a national crisis, an editorial in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* opined: "Shouldn't everyone recognize that there are many different ideas about spirituality, all of them to be respected? Shouldn't the members of one faith [i.e., religion] feel comfortable worshipping [sic] their God, even in the company of people worshipping another? *Aren't we spiritually more alike than different*?" [emphasis mine] (December 3, 2001:B6) That anyone refuses on scriptural grounds to participate in interreligious prayer or worship—period—is all but impossible to comprehend in a culture that venerates pluralism and diversity.

Why (not) participate?

Finally, however, we must ask: What is the point of participation? Is it to provide "visibility in the marketplace of religions"? That is not a scriptural concept. Is it to signify civic unity in a time of crisis, that we Christians are one with representatives of other religions in decrying the evil that surrounds us? That is, good intentions justify the act? The spiritual hazards are simply far too many and too great. We do well to remember that pressure to participate is usually social or cultural—anything but evangelistic: "The mayor, the governor, the President, et al. issued the invitation. The priest, the rabbi, the imam will be there. How can I refuse? What would people think?" And it is pride that prompts illusory self-assurance: "*My* contribution will be distinctive. *My* message will be clear. *My* prayer will stand out from the other three or five (serial, but equal) prayers addressed to a sequence of 'deities.'" Another verse from 1 Corinthians 10 may well apply in the context: "Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (v. 12).

Rather, at interreligious worship or prayer events, civic or otherwise, let our clearly explained absence *be* our public witness. There are far better and more appropriate—and less hazardous and less ambiguous—opportunities and occasions for proclaiming the Good News of salvation through Christ alone and for living that faith in public contexts. For interreligious events, a pastoral decision based on clear scriptural guidelines, including proscription, is always in order. Practical matters of *fellowship*, that is, activities involving other Christians, offer adequate opportunities for casuistry. The Scriptures, Old and New Testaments alike, are unambiguous regarding *interreligious* relationships. Sophisticated judgment is seldom required.

The bottom line for Christians: KIS (Keep It Scriptural)

Exodus 20 and Matthew 22 (First Commandment); 1 Corinthians 10; 2 Corinthians 6.

David O. Berger

Response

Witness in the Marketplace of Religions: An Opportunity to Be Seized

David Berger's article, "Confessing the One True God in the Context of Public Interreligious Events" raises important issues about opportunities for witness to the One True God in the context of "public interreligious events." Since my own ideas are somewhat different and we are both members of the *Lutheran Mission Matters* editorial committee, I want to thank him for giving me the opportunity to share my views.

My concern takes seriously the last phrase of the article title, "public interreligious events," and that phrase sets the tone for this article. The time is very likely coming when Christian faith will have no privilege in American society, and all our public witnessing will be done in a context where all religions and spiritualities are regarded as equally valid. Christians will need to bear witness in a truly free-marketplace of religions.

To put this issue in perspective, I think we must recognize that this is not an issue about the answer to the famous Lutheran question: "What does this mean?" but about that second Lutheran question: "How is this done?" In my more than thirty years of service with LCMS World Mission, I met and worked with many people who were already working in the free-marketplace of ideas and also in areas where the marketplace was not very free because Christians were a small minority in a vast sea of people outside the Christian faith. In all those situations, I never heard a suggestion that the Christian faith was something that could be compromised or watered down to make it more compatible with the non-Christian religion. In my experience, people who have sufficient courage to share the Gospel in the marketplace are among those who are most seriously concerned about a pure Christian message and how it can be faithfully communicated in a non-Christian and perhaps even anti-Christian context.

This does not mean that they do not have continuing discussions in the family, in the Christian congregation, in the Christian community, about how this message is to be shared. What should be said? How should it be said? Where should it be said? Can we say more than we are already saying? Are we saying so much that we

turn people off? Are we pulling our punches, saying less than we can and must say to faithfully communicate the message of God's saving work?

These are important questions, and I think that if we pay attention to the Bible as the Berger article has done, we will gain some insight into the task God has given us along with some guidance about how to do it. My view is that God wants Christians to be crossing cultural boundaries, not with the expectation that Christians can only do their work inside safe boundaries where Christians are in control, but God prepares His people to work in situations that He has prepared them to handle. For some, this may be a conversation across a backyard fence. For some, this may involve speaking to a crowd in a public place, standing next to a non-Christian person who has just expressed his non-Christian or even anti-Christian faith in a way intended to influence and win over a crowd—surely a stressful and high-risk situation—but also a situation that God says His people will know how to handle because He guides them through His Spirit (Mt 10:18–20), and His word accomplishes its saving task (Is 55:11).

Questions about when and how the Gospel can be shared go back to the very beginning of Christian history as we can see from events like the Jerusalem council (Acts 15). For one Christian party, witness to the Christian faith was not complete without inclusion of the signs of Jewish piety that had preserved the identity of the believing community for centuries; but for Peter, who identified himself as the apostle to the new community, the Gentiles, they were "a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10 ESV). As Paul makes clear in Galatians 2, questions about the importance of Jewish dietary regulations and other customs continued as live issues deep into Peter's ministry, a ministry that Paul evaluates as "the gospel to the circumcised" (Gal 2:7–8 ESV). It is a sign of health, I think, when Christians are discussing and learning from one another how they can share the Gospel fully and accurately in a new context.

At the same time, there can be no doubt that Paul expected the Christian community to live in constant contact with the non-Christian community and that he considered these contacts as an important way in which the Christian faith was brought to the unbelieving community. Even in the most intimate human relationships, Paul expected that Christians married to unbelieving spouses, would remain in their marriages. "For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" (1 Cor 7:16 ESV). Indeed, how do you know? This was the most important consideration for Paul: God puts opportunities for sharing the Gospel in our lives that we need to be grasping, for God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4 ESV).

That is why it is difficult to directly apply Elijah's action on Mt. Carmel to the American situation today. Elijah lived in a theocracy where the ruling class had become admirers of all things Sidonian including Baal, the god of the Sidonians. They were engaged in a clearly-defined program to eliminate worship of the God of

Israel, and this included the use of a state-sponsored prophetic band to intimidate God-fearing people and impose a foreign, pagan religion on the Israelite people. In such circumstances, Elijah had no choice but to strike a revolutionary blow against ruling class oppression led by Ahab and his Sidonian wife, Jezebel.

Americans, however, do not live in a theocracy, but in a country where freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed, and government attempts to give preference to one religion over another are forbidden. It is required of Christians in our context that they carefully examine every situation where the Christian religion loses a privilege or when a privilege formerly reserved to Christians is now extended to other religions or ideologies and to carefully formulate an appropriate response. There can be no doubt that American culture is changing, and as never before, the changes require an authentic and compelling response. The task of the church is not to defend self-servingly its traditional privilege, but in a world where it is regarded as just another set of religious ideas, to bear clear and compelling witness in a winsome way to the God who saves for Jesus' sake.

At the same time, what God is willing to tolerate is illustrated by an event in the life of Elisha, Elijah's successor. Naaman, the Syrian army officer suffering from leprosy, fought obedience to God every step of the way, but finally his healing led to his confession, "Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel" (2 Kgs 5:15 ESV). Yet, he needed one more special arrangement: "In this matter may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master (the king of Syria) goes into the house of (the Syrian god) Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon your servant in this matter" (2 Kgs 5:18 ESV). To which Elisha laconically replied: "Go in peace" (2 Kgs 5:19 ESV). There are different answers in different situations.

The article suggests that those who are thinking about participation in events in the public square—especially in events where spokesmen of other religions will be present should consider the consequences and conclude that the rewards are too few and the risks too great.

There may be situations where this is true, but it is equally true that such situations may offer invaluable opportunities to speak Law and Gospel. In their public lives, Americans are generally a confident people, confident about their understanding of the world and their place in it, confident that their financial and intellectual resources can solve any problem. In normal American public life, there is limited opportunity to gain a meaningful hearing in the public square.

The situation is different after a time of tragedy or disaster. The fact that local news media may call it a "service" does not mean very much aside from the fact that American English does not have widely-recognized terms for religious gatherings other than "service." Christians and the public may well have the opportunity in the future to discover whether they like "public interreligious event" better than the description "prayer service."

When the secular community experiences disaster, when it is clear that Americans do not have all the answers, that mistakes have been made on a national and even personal level, then the community is ready to hear the word of God, a word of judgment that requires repentance and confession even as the assembly longs for a word of hope, a longing that the Christian message can fulfill.

The situation is similar to that encountered by St. Paul in Athens as he worked in the free marketplace of ideas of his day. Americans read the story as if Paul were addressing an afternoon book club, where any kind of casual conversation can take place. In fact, the Areopagus, powerful already in classical Greek times and in Roman times still the most important civic council in Athens, had total control of the civic life of the Athenian people. Paul could not invite himself to a meeting of the Areopagus. His invitation came from the Athenian religious and civic establishment, which probably included not a single Christian. Paul was invited by non-Christians to address a non-Christian assembly composed of high ranking officials of the Athenian state who expected to be addressed by an unsophisticated fool. Their invitation is officious, the words of men accustomed to being in control, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean" (Acts 17:19–20 ESV).

As it turned out, Paul was no fool, and his sophisticated address to the Athenian officials, often described as a sermon, resulted in the willingness of some to hear him again, and, indeed, a number of people walked out from the council and joined Paul and believed, including "Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them" (Acts 17:34 ESV). If Paul had concluded that the setting and the people involved were firmly embedded in Greco-Roman religion and that to respond to their summons would compromise his Christian witness, that he could only witness to people in small settings where he was in control, there would have been no such result, and very likely Christian witness in the European world would have had a different shape.

In our world, silence might have worked in an era when the church was close to the center of the life of the community and had influence in shaping the values of the community. When it was important to hear the voice of the church, then the silence of the church was deafening. In the free marketplace of ideas of today, especially when others are prepared to offer what they have, the silence of the church is taken to mean that Christians either do not care about the suffering of the community or that they have no message in response to the disaster. In the free marketplace of ideas, we have no message unless we speak or act out our ideas. It is a serious mistake if, as a result of our silence, we allow others to define us and our God as unloving and uncaring.

The proposal that the refusal to participate sends a clear message that the participation of others makes it impossible for Christians to participate needs to be recognized, not as some kind of mission outreach strategy, but as a purely defensive strategy to try to hold on to people who are already church members.

The concern is not that non-Christian people will think about Christians more positively and be more open to the Christian message, but rather that Christian people will be tempted to believe that there is no difference between their God and non-Christian deities. Of course, this could happen, but it is more likely to happen when Christians have not been equipped to hear the beliefs of others and respond with an authentic witness of their own to the Gospel as they live and work in the free marketplace of ideas, in the spaces where the church is not in control. What the church is lacking in the modern and postmodern world is not people who keep silent on the sidelines (the church has lots of those), but people who are "prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame" (1 Pt 3:15–16 ESV).

Bearing witness to Jesus in non-Christian society is never easy, and there will always be discussion about how this is to be done. What should be said? How should it be said? When should it be said? These are all questions worthy of discussion. What is indispensable, however, is that something must be said. The Lord of the Church says, "When you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Lk 17:10 ESV). May God open our eyes to see the opportunities to serve that He puts before us.

Daniel L. Mattson