

Lutheran Mission Matters

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Behold! Now Is the Day!

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Abstract: Christianity appears to be fading from the Western world. There are increasing numbers of “nones” and those who claim to be spiritual but not religious. How should the Church bring the message of Christ’s love to this twenty-first century world? This essay offers suggestions as to how the Church might respond to current challenges and move boldly into the remainder of the twenty-first century. Seven suggestions for action are given which can be pursued either by professional church workers or by every baptized Christian.

Introduction

Concern has been expressed about the future of the Christian Church, and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Recent projections predict the possibility that the LCMS could lose another 500,000 members in the next ten years. This is not something to be taken lightly. As these things are discussed, one needs to remember that Christ has promised that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against [My Church]” (Mt 16:18). Still, these dire predictions, viewed in the light of the decline of the Church in Europe, illustrate the need for a serious Christian reflection and response.

How can or should the Church respond to such predictions? The suggestions offered in this essay encourage (1) the Church to avoid acting out of fear of the future, (2) an apologetic approach similar to that of the Early Church, (3) studying the culture, (4) a wholistic approach to witnessing, (5 & 6) clarity and competence in the Church’s teaching and preaching especially in the area of justification, and (7) the need for congregations boldly to witness internally and externally. These suggestions attempt to address current circumstances.



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(1) Avoid Acting Out of Fear of the Future

Often when the news is bad people react out of fear and negativity. It is important that the Church not get caught up in negativism, wringing one's hands in despair, and wishing for the good old days. A study of church history indicates that the Church has experienced difficult times before. However, as the hymn writer said, our God has been our help in ages past, and He is our hope for the years to come! (LSB 733). God has promised to be with us in the midst of joys and successes, as well as in times of trouble and difficulty—"Lo I am with you always!" (Mt 28:20).

When Elijah the prophet despaired and thought that he was the only believer left in Israel, God assured him that he was not alone. Seven thousand had not yet bowed the knee to Baal. God still had work for Elijah to do (1 Kgs 19:13–21). In its infancy the Christian Church was not large. After Pentecost there were slightly more than three thousand Christians in the world. The early Christians did not despair, look at their low numbers, and give up hope. Empowered by God's Holy Spirit, they set out to do the work God called them to do. They boldly shared their faith with others, even in the face of persecution, and the Church grew (Acts 3–4; 5:17–42; 2 Cor 11:22–33). God called His baptized followers to share the Gospel with a world lost in the darkness of sin (Acts 13:1–3). God has commissioned His Church in every age to do the same (Mt 28:18–20).

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The LCMS should study the Early Church's calling and sending and its missiology to affirm what is sound in its mission practice and possibly to gain insight into ways of doing mission work in the twenty-first century.¹ The LCMS's mission journal, *Journal of Lutheran Mission*, and the Lutheran Society for Missiology's *Lutheran Mission Matters* could spearhead this study.

(2) An Apologetic Approach Similar to That of the Early Church

The Church today needs to study the apologetic response of the early Christian Church which existed in a religiously pluralistic, and at times hostile, environment similar to that which exists today.² The first Christians practiced the art of apologetics. On Mars Hill the Holy Spirit moved Paul to use non-Christian sources to help make his religious points (Acts 17:22–34): Plato, Euripides, Epimenides the Cretan, and Aratus.³

The writings of the early Christian apologists like Quadratus, Aristides, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, Origen, Minucius Felix, Tertullian, and Augustine should be studied to learn their methodologies for approaching the world with the truths of the faith. Church historians provide evidence of the influence of the apologetic nature of the Christian faith in its early history.⁴ The Church today could gain insights from apologists of the past for its task in the twenty-first century.⁵

Christians, especially Christian pastors and teachers, should be trained by Christian universities and seminaries in apologetics, logic, philosophy, and metaphysics. Our seminaries and universities should be encouraging students to pursue graduate degrees in the above disciplines. Our Church does a good job of training pastors to be biblical theologians. We should train them to be apologists and philosophers as well.⁶

Pastors and church workers should be familiar with the intellectual foundations for the “nones” and the “spiritual but not religious” movement in order to engage such views. Pastors and Christian teachers need to be knowledgeable about atheistic, anti-religious, or religiously faulty ideas and trends in order to counter them with a sound biblical and rational view. Christian pastors and teachers need familiarity with Christian apologetic books and sites that assist the Church in countering unsound arguments and in helping the laity to share and defend the faith.⁷

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An example of a Christian apologetic presence on the net is Jonathan Morrow’s Think Christianly site.⁸ Lutheran Hour Ministries has a website entitled THRED.org. Concordia University Wisconsin has sponsored an apologetics conference for laity and professional church workers each spring since 2014.

One apologetic book that all Christians should read is Bruce Sheiman, *An Atheist Defends Religion*.⁹ Another atheist, Alain de Botton, writes that religion has been “over-hastily sacrificed . . . on the altar of Reason” and that religious ideas are “useful, effective, and intelligent” and contain much that is good and helpful for non-believers.¹⁰ An excellent book that speaks about the loss people and culture experience when religious beliefs are set aside is *The Sacred in Exile*.¹¹

Sound apologetic arguments are just one part of the Christian’s witness in the world. It is the Holy Spirit who works through the Word of God to bring about conversion.

(3) Studying the Culture

The Church needs to understand that Western culture is living on the residue of its Judeo-Christian heritage, and the influence of that heritage is fading. The culture in which the Church exists is the twenty-first century, not the mid-twentieth century. Whereas in times past the Judeo-Christian faiths were seen as an overall positive, today that perspective is not as prominent, and in decline. Many see organized religion as declining. Others like Jürgen Habermas believe we are living in a “post-secular age.”¹²

Current trends of individual spirituality and loosely defined religion were evident already in the mid-1980s.¹³ Some are writing books about religion without God.¹⁴ This is the culture in which the Church exists today, yet some operate as if there has been no change in the culture since the 1950s.

Thus, Christians need to diligently study the culture in order to understand where people really are. To understand the worldview and beliefs of those outside the Christian Church is to enable a better entrance into a conversation about religious/spiritual beliefs. It shows respect for those beliefs, even though they might be different than the ones held by Christians.

For example, some atheists now hold secular services on Sunday mornings, have Sunday Schools for their children, use their own secular Bibles, hymns, devotional materials, prayers, and worship services for funerals and weddings. This is the spirituality of atheism.¹⁵ Christians should be studying the reasons why atheists need to have worship services, prayer, sacred books, and uplifting devotional materials, as well as the reasons some see no need for any of those things, so that they can respond in meaningful ways.

Furthermore, Christians need continued awareness of the ethnic shifts that have occurred and the great need for Gospel outreach to the many new ethnic and religious groups that have come to the Western world. These shifts necessitate knowledge of the beliefs of other religions.

(4) A Wholistic Approach to Witnessing

Christ sent the Church into the world to witness and to evangelize. That witnessing is done in word and deed. The Church needs to be diligent in performing

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deeds of Christian love and mercy towards others, including those outside the Church. God’s Word tells Christians to do good to people inside and outside the Christian faith (Gal 6:10). Christ emphasized this when He stated that the evidence of salvation in believers is seen by their visiting the sick and imprisoned, feeding the hungry, and clothing the naked (Mt 25:34–36). Christ was concerned with the whole person—body and soul. The Church should continue in that practice as well.

In witnessing to others, it is necessary to understand the importance of relationships and the overall witness of one’s life. Many people were surprised at the friendship of the atheist Richard Dawkins and the Christian, Larry Taunton.¹⁶ The Christian apologist, Gary Habermas, noted his close friendship with the Anthony Flew, the atheist, who at the end of his life became a theist.¹⁷ Such relationships break down barriers of misunderstanding, animosity, and hatred of “the other.” Christians should view every human as an individual God loves and someone for whom Christ died, because He desires the salvation of all. Christians should actively pursue positive relationships with individuals not in the faith and pray daily for the conversion of those outside the faith. In so doing, they are living the command to love one’s neighbor as one loves self, (Mt 22:39) and are in accord with our Synod’s emphasis on “Mercy, Witness, and Life Together.”

(5) Clarity in the Church’s Teaching and Preaching

The Church needs to be very clear as to what she teaches about salvation. God justifies sinners by grace, which is received through faith worked by the Holy Spirit. Human good works do not save. Some of the antagonism against the Church comes from a faulty understanding of what God’s Word teaches about salvation and other doctrines. Surveys have revealed that many Christians believe incorrectly about how one is saved—combining good works with the saving work of Christ, believing Golden Rule Christianity, or some other form of works-righteousness.¹⁸ In its preaching and teaching, the Church must proclaim clearly the Gospel of God’s grace in Christ, which saves without any human contribution. Many people have rejected the Christian faith because they were taught or believed incorrectly about it.¹⁹ Cultural reasons for rejecting the faith also need to be studied.²⁰

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It is also important to remember that even when the way of salvation is properly taught and believed, Christianity will not necessarily be viewed positively by those who have no faith. One can see and understand God correctly only by the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). Unbelievers do not have the Holy Spirit, and so it should not be surprising that many will understand God incorrectly.

Many outside the faith view God as a killjoy, a nasty rule maker whose rules cannot be kept, as someone who delights in inflicting harm on people, or as one who is powerless to stop evil. At times Christians are viewed as looking down on sinners and others not as good as them, and as people who delight in God's destruction of the wicked. At times, even Christians exhibit these views.

In contrast to such false views, God's Word teaches that God loves all sinners and has no joy in the destruction of the wicked (Jn 3:16; Ez 18:23, 30–32). God the Father sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to save sinners from their sins—"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (Jn 3:17). Every Christian should, like God, be grieved by the fate of the unbeliever and motivated to share the love of Christ with all so that they would be saved. The positive, respectful, loving relationships Christians have with those not in the faith can help them to see God more accurately.

(6) Competence in the Church's Teaching and Preaching

The Church needs to examine how she teaches the faith. Is the Church merely teaching fluff or is the Church engaged in teaching the substance of the faith?²¹ What methods are being used? As important as it is to examine its educational methods, the Church should not simply rely on getting a right methodology (though good methodology is helpful). Rather, it should rely on the Spirit of God to plant faith in the baptized and to nurture that faith by means of the preaching and teaching of the Word of God and the proper administration of the sacraments.

(7) Congregations Need to Boldly Witness Internally and Externally

At times congregations become internally focused. Christian congregations need to focus on doing both internal (building up the faith of its members) and external evangelism (seeking the spiritual well-being of those outside the Christian faith). Christian congregations need involvement in their communities so that the members interact regularly with those not in the faith. This affords opportunities to form

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relationships with people other than Christians and provides opportunities to touch lives with the love and grace of Christ.²²

Conclusion

It truly is time to seize the day! “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2). That Christ’s Church is moving forward can be seen in the growth of the Church in Africa, Asia, and even in the West. Our God is at work. Souls are being saved in the global North and South. The sharing of God’s Word does not return void—it will accomplish its purpose (Is 55:10–11). As followers of Christ, we are to pray fervently for God’s blessings on the work of His Church. God has called every baptized Christian into His Kingdom to serve in carrying out that work. In answer to God’s call to serve, we are to be willing workers like Isaiah, saying by the power of the Spirit, “Here I am Lord. Send me!” (Is 6:8). This is part of the calling and vocation of every baptized Christian.

Christ commanded the Church to continue to bear witness to Him in the public square in every possible way so that the Gospel is shared and souls are saved, Christ’s name is exalted, and His Church continues to show forth the praises of Him who calls people out of the darkness of sin into the light of Christ. “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16).

As we labor in God’s Kingdom, we trust God for the increase and do not rely on ourselves. God has called us into His Kingdom to live out our faith and to witness to Christ. By God’s hand, souls will be saved and the Church will continue until eternity.

Endnotes

¹ Past studies are: *The Mission of the Christian Church in the World: A Review of the 1965 Mission Affirmations* (St. Louis: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, September 1974); *A Theological Statement of Mission* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod/The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, September 1991). Other helpful resources are: Klaus Detlev Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009); Ingemar Oberg, *Luther and World Mission: A Historical and Systematic Study with Special Reference to Luther’s Bible Exposition*, trans. Dean Apel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007); John A. Maxfield, ed., *Mission Accomplished? Challenges to and Opportunities for Lutheran Missions in the 21st Century* (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 2008); Carl E. Braaten & Robert W. Jenson, eds., *The Strange New Word of the Gospel: Re-Evangelizing in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002); Charles Van Engen, *The State of Missiology Today: Global Innovations in Christian Witness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

² Herbert W. Workman, *Persecution in the Early Church: A Chapter in the History of Renunciation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014); Robert Shortt, *Christianophobia: A Faith Under Attack* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2012); Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

³ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1973), 357, fn. 42; 359–60.

⁴ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), 81–84, 104–108, 198, 238–242, 248–250, 263–264; Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Complete in One Volume: Volume One—The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2009), 49–57.

⁵ One such study is David R. Liefeld, “Civil Religion and the Early Church: Syncretism and Doctrinal Integrity in the Apologetic of Athenagoras of Athens,” in David L. Adams and Ken Schurb, eds., *The Anonymous God: The Church Confronts Civil Religion and American Society* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 45–92.

⁶ J. P. Moreland, “Philosophical Apologetics, the Church, and Contemporary Culture,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39, no. 1 (March 1996): 123–150.

⁷ Some apologetic works are John Warwick Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978); Anthony J. Steinbronn, *Worldviews: A Christian Response to Religious Pluralism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007); Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008); Norman L. Giesler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976); J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987); Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict Fully Updated to Answer Questions Challenging Christians Today* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999); Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Mary Poplin, *Is Reality Secular? Testing the Assumptions of Four Global Worldviews* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014). The works of C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, Alvin Plantinga and Cornelius van Til should also be read.

⁸ This site is tied with his book, *Think Christianly: Looking at the Intersection of Faith and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011). Morrow engages the world via a web site (www.thinkchristianly.org), Twitter, Facebook, an interactive blog, iTunes, Podcasts, YouTube, and FeedBurner.

⁹ Bruce Sheiman, *An Atheist Defends Religion: Why Humanity Is Better Off with Religion than Without It* (New York: Alpha, 2009).

¹⁰ Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer’s Guide to the Uses of Religion* (New York: Vintage International, 2012), 311, 312.

¹¹ Gillian McCann & Gitte Beschsgaard, *The Sacred in Exile: What It Really Means to Lose Our Religion* (n.p.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

¹² Jürgen Habermas, “An Awareness of What Is Missing,” in Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), 18; also Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999).

¹³ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, & Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Perennial Library/Harper & Row, 1986), 219–249. For current trends, see Armand J. Boehme,

“Spirituality and Religion: The Shift from East to West and Beyond,” *Missio Apostolica* 23, no. 1 (May 2015): 21–36.

¹⁴ Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁵ Armand J. Boehme, “The Spirituality of Atheism,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* 25, no. 1 (May 2017): 105–122; Frank Turek, *Stealing From God: Why Atheists Need God to Make Their Case* (Nashville: NavPress, 2014); John Leland, “The Positive Death Movement Comes to Life,” *The New York Times* (June 22, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/22/nyregion/the-positive-death-movement-comes-to-life.html>.

¹⁶ Larry Alex Taunton, *The Faith of Christopher Hitchens: The Restless Soul of the World’s Most Notorious Atheist* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2016).

¹⁷ Habermas’s comment was stated at an apologetics conference at Concordia University, Mequon, WI in March 2015; Anthony Flew, *There Is A God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

¹⁸ Armand J. Boehme, “The Church and the Culture of the Millennials—The Best or Worst of Times?” *Missio Apostolica* 21, no. 1 (May 2013): 103–106, 120–121.

¹⁹ Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012). Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008).

²⁰ Contrasting studies are David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UN Christian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity—And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008); Bradley R. E. Wright, *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites . . . and Other Lies You’ve Been Told* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2010).

²¹ Christopher Richmann, “Restoring Proclamation to the Center of Youth Ministry,” *Lutheran Forum* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 20–25.

²² Helpful resources are Rick Russ & Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2004); Terry Tieman, David Born, Dwight Marable, *Hinges: Opening Your Church’s Doors to the Community* (Cordova, TN: Transforming Churches Network, 2015); Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church 2.0: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013); Greg Finke, *Joining Jesus on His Mission: How to Be an Everyday Missionary* (Elgin, IL/Tyler, TX: Tenth Power, 2014). The LCMS is also working on new evangelism materials suited for the 21st century—*Every One His Witness (E1HW)*.